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Van Gogh

Peter Burra

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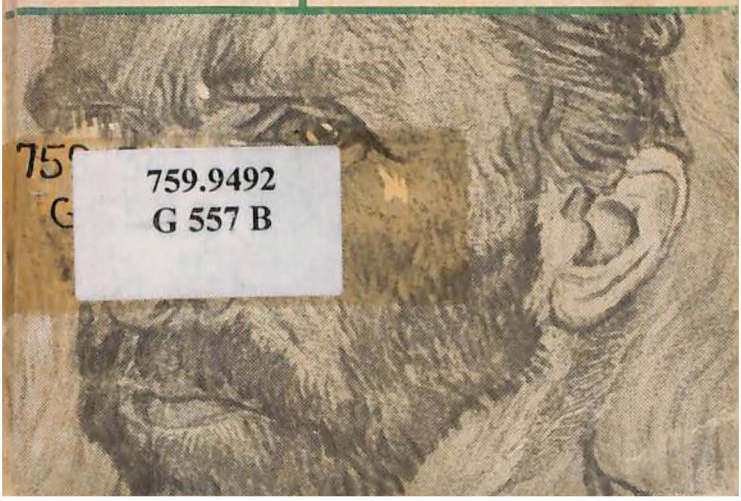

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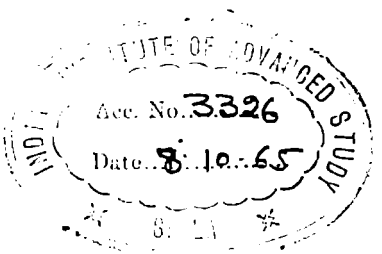

To

JR. V. W. VAN GOGH

By kind permission of Messrs. Constable & Co., Ltd., numerous quotations have been made from their volumes, *The Letters of Vincent van Gogh to his Brother* and *Further Letters of Vincent van Gogh to his Brother.*

Contents

Chronology

1853.	March 30.	Birth of Vincent at Zundert.
	April 24.	Baptism.
1857.	May 1.	Birth of Theo.
1864.	Oct. 1.	Vincent goes to school at Zevenbergen.
1869.	July 30.	Joins Goupil's at The Hague.
1872.	August.	Theo's visit, and the walk to Ryswyk.
1873.	May.	Transferred to London.
1874.	June.	Rejected by Ursula Loyer. Return to Holland (Helvoirt) for holidays.
	July 11.	Return to London.
	Oct.—Dec.	Transferred temporarily to Paris.
	Dec.	Return to London.
1875.	May.	Transferred to Paris.
1876.	March.	Leaves Goupil's. Return home to Etten.
	April.	Teaching in Mr. Stokes's school at Ramsgate.
	July.	Joins Mr. Jones at Isleworth.
	Dec.	Return to Etten.
1877.	Jan.	In the bookshop of Blussé and Braam, Dordrecht.
	May.	Amsterdam.
1878.	July.	Abandons attempt to enter University.
	August.	Joins school of evangelists in Brussels.
	Nov.	Goes into the Borinage.

1879.	Jan.	Receives nomination as evangelist.
	July.	Nomination not renewed.
1879-80.		The critical winter.
1880.	March.	Turns to art. Lives at Cuesmes.
	Oct.	Moves to Brussels.
1881.	April.	Returns home to Etten.
	August.	Falls in love with K.
	Dec.	Attempts to see her in Amsterdam. Goes on to The Hague. Returns home for short time.
	Dec. 25.	Last family quarrel. Settles at The Hague in the Schenkweg (No. 138).
1882.	Jan.—Feb.	He meets Sien.
	June.	In hospital.
	July 1.	Birth of Sien's child. They all settle at Schenkweg (No. 136).
1883.	Sept.	He goes to Drenthe (works at Hoogeveen, and New Amsterdam).
	Dec.	Returns home to Nuenen.
1884.	Jan.	Mother's accident.
	August.	Miss Begemann takes poison.
1885.	March 27.	Death of father.
	May.	Moves into the studio.
	Nov.	Leaves Holland for Antwerp.
1886.	Jan.	Joins the academy classes.
	March.	Arrival in Paris.
1888.	Feb.	Leaves for Arles. Lives at Restaurant Carrée.
	May.	Takes the yellow house.
	June.	Visits Saintes-Maries.
	Oct.	Gauguin's arrival.
	Dec. 23.	He cuts off a piece of his ear.
1889.	Feb. 27.	The petition to the mayor.
	April 17.	Wedding of Theo and Jo.
	May 8.	Vincent enters St. Rémy Asylum.

1890.	Jan. 31.	Birth of Theo's son.
	May 17.	Vincent returns to Paris.
	May 21.	To Auvers-sur-Oise.
	July 1.	Short visit to Paris.
	July 27.	(evening) He shoots himself.
	July 29.	(1.30 a.m.) Death.
1891.	Jan. 25.	Death of Theo at Utrecht. In 1913 his body was brought to Auvers and laid by the side of Vincent's.

Van Gogh

Chapter 1

A tragic hero—birth and parentage—Zundert—school—at Goupil's in The Hague—the Walk to the Ryswyk Mill—London—Ursula Loyer—Paris—abandons art-dealing for the Church—schoolmaster at Ramsgate and Isleworth.

"LIFE," SAID Vincent van Gogh, "is like a single journey in a train. You go fast, but cannot distinguish any object very close, and above all you do not see the engine."

Being, however, possessed of a Promethean unwillingness to follow the ordained paths of nature, he was constantly impelled to jump out and board the engine himself.

The adventure led him away from such familiar imagery into more abstract thinking. He was a man of power who found that the world is made up of many powers, each seeking to destroy the other. The conflict which he witnessed outside him he found repeated inside himself. The tumult in man was a reflection of the tumult in nature, yet there must be a pattern, could he but find it. But "we are still far from the time," he wrote, a month before he killed himself, "when people will understand the curious relations which exist between one fragment of nature and another, which all the same explain each other and set

each other off." He was speaking to his brother of two of his canvases which he had noticed, in defiance of conventional taste, went very well together side by side, "the one being perpendicular and in rose," the other horizontal "pale green and greenish yellow, the complementary of rose." With constant faith and in moments of a sort of vision, he had felt the possibility of a state where conflicts were resolved. Hanging his pictures side by side on the wall he perceived with his own eyes the symbol of such a resolution that had come from within himself, and was satisfied. Like Carlyle's philosopher—who in fact greatly influenced him—he rose in "God-created majesty" against the Everlasting No, and turned heroically towards the Everlasting Yea "wherein all contradiction is solved."

Man must bear arms against the denying spirit; and to find the pattern in nature—which he attempted to explain, like Bridges, in neat figures—he must achieve a patterned, ordered, single mind. A high austerity was the sum of his ambition. He was perhaps impatient in the examination of articles of faith, and indifferent to their objective truth if they satisfied a mood. He was content to think in terms of train-journeys, of "invisible hemispheres," or of two-sided tapestries. Certainly it is well to indulge any thought that brings relief from the pains that prevent progress, any thought that will restore the power of adding pictures to the wall. One thing paralyses action in a man—the sense of futility. Let any purpose be declared, by religion or by philosophy, so long as the chance evidences of life do not strike him motionless because it seems vain to be otherwise. From earliest days Van Gogh was determined to lift himself above the futility of common life, the "almost universal vul-

garity," the provincial drabness, ugliness, meanness of this modern civilisation which wastes the whole splendour of life and at the same time jealously resists every attempt of the artist to surpass it. He devoured Renan, Carlyle, Zola. "If one keeps on faithfully doing what is worth doing," he said, "and does not waste one's love on insignificant and unworthy and meaningless things, one will get more light by and by and grow stronger." Even in his last days, "Good Lord, how you have to mess about in life!" he wrote, and was aware till the very end of the dangers to be feared from futility. An order had to be seen in life that it might be brought into art; or, alternatively, art was an order to impose on life. And so "the laws of the colours are unutterably beautiful," he wrote, "just because they are not accidental"; and consonant with this belief was a new one about God—that "people no longer believe in a God who capriciously and despotically flies from one thing to another"; as a result of which "one begins to feel more respect and admiration for, and faith in, nature." This last clause is vague enough, but such ideas kept power alive in him. Nevertheless, to us who read the vast and wonderful correspondence that passed between the brothers, the thing remains a mystery. We are still far from the time of understanding the fragments of nature; but as a pastime for our bewilderment we put before us the figures of great men, who "left the vivid air signed with their honour." Van Gogh was a hero, in the fullest sense of Carlyle's; he belongs to the list which includes Prometheus and King Lear. His life was a tragedy as complete in its details, and as terrible in its implications, with the overwhelming addition that we know it was a true event, and one very close to our own times.

Vincent was already a lonely child among his brothers and sisters. His father was the youngest and least distinguished son in a family of twelve, the children of a notable scholar and respected parson of the Reformed Church who was born in the year of the French revolution. This grandfather was also called Vincent, having the name from his great-uncle, a sculptor, who, during the eighteenth century, brought fortune, together with a taste for art, into the old and distinguished family. When the painter's father, Theodorus, was born in 1822, this grandfather was Predikant in Breda, the only town of North Brabant in which the Protestant Church still prevailed over the Catholic, after Napoleon restored the big churches to the latter as being the larger community. So important a living was never destined for his son Theodorus. When in 1849 he graduated at Utrecht, he was appointed to Zundert, a little Brabant village just by the Belgian frontier on the main road from Breda to Antwerp, where the community of the Reformed Church numbered a little over a hundred out of a population of six thousand souls. There he remained, a man of great charm and noble charity, for twenty-two years; and his subsequent appointments took him into even deeper obscurity, for though he possessed the nature of a saint, and was used to extend his kindness with gifts of money and clothes to the Catholic community, he lacked genius as a preacher and was not one to bear militant responsibilities when the Dutch Church was approaching a constitutional crisis. It was a time when the country was dominated by clericalism, when the Church—with that Dutch genius for diversity of opinion—was preparing to separate into different Churches, and evolving as it did so the

system of clerical politics. It was a dark, ungentle time, poor in spirit. "Anti-revolutionary"[1] is assuredly the most unenterprisingly negative title that any conservative tendency ever gave itself. Bigotry was law; and in North Brabant, where the Van Gogh family moved, life suffered in addition from the peculiar hardness of minorities. It was a strangely unfitting world to give birth to a fierce libertine.

Two years after his appointment to Zundert, the "handsome Dominee," as he was called, married Anna Carbentus, daughter of a flourishing bookbinder in The Hague. Her younger sister was already the wife of Vincent, Theo van Gogh's favourite brother, while her elder sister had married one Stricker, a well-known clergyman at Amsterdam. Anna was a lively, lovable woman, and their life together was one of great happiness. On the 30th March, 1852, a dead son was born to them, but a year later, on the same day, Vincent Willem was born, the future painter, a strong and healthy boy. He was, indeed, the only child of the Van Goghs whose health gave the parents no grounds for anxiety, while later his immense physical strength is proved by the tremendous exertions to which he would put himself without a thought. His appearance and his character he inherited from his mother, taking from her some of his violence, and his unbreakable strength of will. But the children who followed were for the most part more gentle and more delicate. Two years after Vincent came a daughter Anna, and two years after her that brother Theo whose absolute sacrifice of his own life to Vincent's has earned for him the

[1] The name of the newly forming Calvinist clerical party. It did not obtain its first parliamentary majority until 1888, when Vincent had left Holland.

worship of the world. Next came two sisters, Elizabeth and Willemien, and lastly, fourteen years younger than Vincent, his little brother Cor.

But Vincent among them all was a lonely child. They would look up from their games, and watch him going alone out of the garden gate and along the path through the fields to the stream behind the village, where he would search for butterflies, insects, plants. In those days the whole beauty of Brabant, its heaths, woods, and cornfields, entered into his soul. Sometimes he would go to the workshop of old Franken, the carpenter, to pass the time with him and join in the work. It seems that, unlike less austere children, he had no inclination for scribbling, even at school, though it is recorded that he did once model a little clay elephant, and once produced a "very curious drawing of a cat"; but he destroyed them both "when according to his notion such a fuss was made about it." The story reminds one of Ibsen's methodical destruction of every house of bricks as soon as he had finished it, dreading to rest for a moment upon achievement.

But Theo, who was already his chosen friend, recalled that he could, when he wished, invent the most delightful games, and that once out of gratitude they presented him with the most beautiful rose-bush in the garden.

Nothing in their childhood, where so much was begun, was ever forgotten by the brothers. Zundert in their memory was the standard for all simplicities, whose loss was something to shed tears for.

After attending the village school, where it was found that the peasant boys made him too rough—so early did he share their nature—and after a govern-

ess had been brought to the Pastorie, Vincent was sent away to the boarding-school of Mr. Provily at Zevenbergen, near the great waters of the Hollandsch Diep. He was eleven years old, and his father and mother accompanied him there for the first time one rainy day. Then they left him, and Vincent remained staring after the carriage and the wet road, to enter upon four or five obscure and lonely years. At the end of that time the Dominee sent a young peasant to fetch him back, and from Breda to Zundert they had to walk for about three hours. Vincent was carrying a heavy parcel, which the young man offered to take for him. "No, thank you," he replied. "Every man must carry his own load"—the first of his recorded utterances.

The time was come—he was sixteen years old—when the choice of a profession was urgent, and, as Vincent showed no particular inclinations, the advice of his uncles was consulted. These uncles had done much better for themselves in the world than their younger brother the Dominee. Uncle Johannes was a Vice-Admiral, and when Vincent went later to Amsterdam he gave him a home in his house at the Navy Yard, of which he was Commandant. Three of them were art dealers. Uncle Hein had his business at Brussels, Uncle Cornelius (always known as "C. M.") at Amsterdam, and Uncle Vincent, the greatest of them, at The Hague. This "gifted, witty, and intelligent" man, had obtained so much influence in the art trade that Goupil of Paris wisely increased his own prospects by offering him a partnership. So Uncle Vincent had gone away to Paris, leaving a certain Mr. Tersteeg in charge at The Hague. But by this time he was already an invalid, and, having amassed a fortune, was living in retirement at Prinsenhage, between his old father at

Breda and his favourite brother at Zundert. In his large country house there, he had brought together a rare collection of pictures, where the nephew who bore his name, and was generally thought to be his heir, was first introduced to the world of art. And it was through his offices now that Vincent, in July 1869, entered the house of Goupil & Co. at The Hague under Mr. Tersteeg.

Vincent at once showed himself to be a keen, efficient worker, taking an almost ecstatic pride in the firm of which it was presumed that he would one day be the head. He boarded comfortably with a family in a quiet courtyard off the Lange Beestenmarkt, and found plenty of intellectual intercourse at the homes of various friends and relations, especially with Aunt Sophy Carbentus, one of whose daughters married Anton Mauve; another, the less known painter, Le Comte.

Those years were the last quiet ones that he was ever to know; but who can tell what consuming passions were growing, what richness of thought was being stored up in that silent time.

While he was at The Hague his father left Zundert at last and was transferred to Helvoirt, a little village on the road that runs south from 's Hertogenbosch; and every day, in all weathers, Theo had to tramp the five miles across country to school in Oisterwijk and back again. But in the July or August of 1872 he came to spend a few days with Vincent in the Beestenmarkt, and all the time that Vincent could spare from work they spent together. On one of those days they went out into the country—for Vincent loved walking above all things—and took the path through the meadows

and along the canal to Ryswyk. And, while they walked, they talked; and slowly there grew in each the knowledge of the other, and in the knowledge of each other they found the knowledge of themselves. With a sudden unexpected happiness they discovered a oneness in all their purposes and opinions. Then it was that, having spoken aloud at last, Vincent realised that he could dare somehow to express himself, and he knew, while Theo listened, that a power of thought was hidden in him. It had been raining, and they went to drink milk at the mill. Vincent was nineteen, and Theo was fifteen. It was a moment that would grow still more perfect with time.

When Theo had gone back to Helvoirt, Vincent wrote him a little note to say how much he was missing him. It is the first letter in one of the world's most wonderful correspondences. The writing of letters has often satisfied a peculiar need in men of great feeling. Swift, under cover of his gently mocking *bagatelle,* contrived in this way to tell Stella something of what he felt for her, which in actual speech he was powerless to utter. He loved her so deeply that he had to build himself this armour against irreparable loss. In a like way, Vincent took poetry to be the garment of his strength—for, like all tragic heroes, he was a man of the most extraordinary power. His story is of one long search to discover the proper objects of that power in the world about him. The object might be changed, but one thing was constant, the power itself, clothed in the most intensely poetic imagination. Nothing he saw was without significance to him, for he was "so much a poet that he saw the sublime in the most ordinary commonplace things." In addition he had a command of words, a skill in description, and a sense

of the dramatic that are rare in one whose first devotion is not to literature, and are rather heightened by their wholly unself-conscious method of delivery—the spontaneous utterance of pure and immediate thought.

Thus, for his satisfaction, Vincent began these communications with Theo; and again, just as Swift had used Stella as a sort of mirror to find himself reflected in, Vincent took his brother to assist in the completion of himself.

For from now onward—if, indeed, that had not been his labour from earliest childhood—he devoted himself to the perfection of his integrity.

A few months after Theo's visit to The Hague it was decided that the younger brother was to start working at Brussels in Uncle Hein's gallery, which was also now part of the Goupil concern; and thither he went, at the beginning of 1873, when he was not yet sixteen years old. A little later Vincent was transferred to the branch in London; and after spending a night at Helvoirt, where his mother rejoiced to find that four years in the town had done nothing to spoil his simplicity, and after going on to Paris for a few days by way of Brussels, he came to England at the end of May.

First he lodged in a boarding-house kept by two ladies, where there were also two parrots and three musical Germans; but, that being too expensive for him, he moved, in August, to the house of a Mrs. Loyer, in one of the suburbs. She was the widow of a curate from the south of France, and with her daughter Ursula kept a day-school for little children. From there, every day he walked to the office in Southamp-

ton Street. Life in London enchanted him. He was earning £90 a year, and with a loyal interest in the profits of his firm he threw himself heartily into the business of buying and selling. He purchased a tophat, for "you cannot be in London without one." And going home from the office in the evening he used to stop on the Thames Embankment, rapt with its beauty, and attempt to make sketches of what he saw; but, since he knew nothing about how to do it, "the result was nil."

In town he came across much that was interesting in the art world, and met, amongst others, Matthew Maris, who was then living in London. He also became acquainted with English art, for much of which he felt the profoundest admiration, but certain examples of which provoked in him utterances of the most delicious malice.

Looking back afterwards, he found that there was almost nothing he had not loved in London. "O fulness of rich life, your gift, O God!" he cried in the words of a Dutch poet. It is said to have been the happiest year of his life. He was twenty-one years old. On Sundays he continued his habit of walking and went much into the country, to Boxhill once, and once he walked all the way to Brighton and back; and on other occasions he went boating on the Thames. And when the year had turned and the spring began to appear he gave himself up to joy in nature, and told Theo how the lilacs and hawthorn and laburnums were in bloom, how beautiful the chestnuts were, how early the apple-trees had blossomed; and in the garden of the boarding-house he planted poppies, sweet peas, and mignonette—for he had fallen, for the first time, in love.

But he told no one that, not even Ursula herself, till at the end of June he was due to return to Holland for his holiday.

His love had been so silent that she was simply not aware he had been interested in her. She was, in fact, already engaged elsewhere; she was compelled to say "No." It was a terrible answer to one who, urged by an inner passion to self-completion, had resolved to submit all things to his will. He tried everything to make her break the engagement, but he failed, and his radiant happiness was suddenly changed into a bitter gloom. He came back to Helvoirt thin, silent, dejected, and to avoid conversation spent most of his ten days' holiday drawing various parts of the house.

To this first fatal experience of unhappiness can be traced his tragic tendency to repeat the failure by selecting love-objects which could never satisfy him. Henceforth he approached life with a tragic mind.

When the holidays were over and he came back to London, he found the city still as beautiful, but had no more inclination to draw, and took swimming-lessons instead. His sister Anna came over with him, hoping to find employment in England, and intending, perhaps, to watch and protect him. But he maintained his independence, and was living alone in Kensington, since return to the Loyers was out of the question. His life seemed utterly empty, but he was reading a great deal, and chiefly Michelet's *L'Amour*. "Such a book teaches us that there is much more in Love than people generally suppose." It was a "revelation" and a "gospel" to him, and he begged Theo to read it too. He became more and more strange; what his habits were is not recorded, but to these months belong the striking words, "Virginity of soul and impurity of body can

go together." His parents became anxious for his health, and Uncle Vincent effected a temporary removal to the Paris branch, from October to December, hoping that the change would do him good. The first four months of 1875 he spent again in London, reading a tremendous amount—George Eliot, Renan, and more Michelet—and he copied into a little notebook for Theo all the poems that he liked best. The lack of understanding in his family began to engender bitterness in him. He resented the fact that C. M. and Mr. Tersteeg had been in London without once coming to see where he lived. "In my opinion they have been too often to the Crystal Palace, and other places with which they had nothing to do." It was May again, it was nearly a year since he was defeated in his love. He felt that he was drifting into futility, and that the Self which he had sworn to make inviolable had lost all its purposes. Till at last Renan roused him from that lethargy, and he copied out at the end of his last letter from London to Theo, these words:

> Pour agir dans le monde il faut mourir à soi-même. Le peuple, qui se fait le missionaire d'une pensée religieuse, n'a plus d'autre patrie que cette penseé.
>
> L'homme n'est pas ici-bas seulement pour être heureux, il y est pas même pour être simplement honnête. Il y est pour réaliser de grandes choses pour la société, pour arriver à la noblesse et dépasser la vulgarité où se traine l'existence de presque tous les individus.

Into the void left by Ursula he had introduced a passion for religion. He had always been a devoted churchman, and at The Hague had even taken lessons

from a Bible teacher. But now even his clerical family became panic-struck at the turn which events took. He was transferred again to Paris, and remained there for nearly a year—much against his will. Though he retained an eager interest in art, he had lost all interest in being an art dealer. His behaviour in the gallery made no compromise with the advance in his way of thinking, for it is said that the *rustre Hollandais* had a tactless habit of correcting any errors in the taste of the Paris ladies who visited him. Every evening he retired to his lodging in Montmartre to read the Bible with young Harry Gladwell, an English colleague at the gallery. He destroyed all his books by Michelet, and asked Theo to do the same—six months after he had insisted on his reading them. He bade him beware of the poems of Heine, which he had himself copied into his note-book; and distributed the *Imitation of Christ*, together with fragments of the Bible and transcriptions of English hymns, among his sisters. Their comment was that "his religion makes him quite dull and unsociable." Actually he still retained much humour and humanity. Eventually, however, it became clear that it was useless for him to remain at the gallery any longer, and a conversation with Boussod, Goupil's son-in-law and successor, ended in his dismissal from the firm where he had worked for seven years and of which he was one day to have been the head.

He was twenty-three years old and workless. He returned home. The Dominee had now come back from Helvoirt to the neighbourhood of Breda (where his father had died the year before), and was installed at Etten, on the main line to Rosendaal. Vincent spent about ten days there. His uncles, in deep disappointment, had washed their hands of him; his father, who

could not afford to keep him (his stipend being about 800 guilders a year), advised his finding a job in a museum or starting a gallery on his own. But Vincent, who was always hankering to get back to England, had obtained, through an advertisement, an unsalaried post in a preparatory school at Ramsgate, for which place, in the middle of April 1876, he set forth, to start the first chapter in four years of experiment and waste.

On the journey from Etten to Rotterdam he passed by Zevenbergen, and remembered his remote childhood with a strange longing. In the evening he sailed down the river, and came out to sea under a majestic sunset. He watched the dunes of Holland, dazzling white in the sun, vanish away from him, and the grey spires go down under the horizon. Then, after the sunset, it became rather rough, and he went below.

> Our life, we might compare it with a journey, we go from the place where we were born to a far-off haven. Our earlier life might be compared to sailing on a river, but very soon the waves become higher, the wind more violent, we are at sea almost before we are aware of it. . . .

Thus he took his imagery from that journey when he preached in the little church at Turnham Green. For, there being no prospects of a salary, and since he craved to obtain some connection with the Church, he left Mr. Stokes of Ramsgate after two months, and attached himself to Mr. Jones of Isleworth as a sort of curate-teacher. He walked from Ramsgate to London by Canterbury, where he rested for a few hours near a pond, accomplishing the journey at one stretch in two days and a night without bothering about sleep. After

two days in London, he walked to Welwyn, where Anna was now living; and then he settled down at Isleworth. But a good deal of his time there he spent in walking to London on errands for Mr. Jones. On these occasions he would start off at three or four in the morning, reaching Hyde Park at daybreak, "where the leaves were already falling from the trees, and the Virginia creeper against the houses was beautifully red, and there was a mist." Then he would turn into a Kensington church, and continue on into London to the galleries where he would look up old acquaintances and see the latest pictures; and after that go on to try and accomplish the object of his journey, which was generally to induce impecunious parents to pay their bills for Mr. Jones—and it took him all over the slums and the suburbs. In the evening he would delay in the lamp-lit streets, especially if it was Saturday night; and then, late in the darkness, go back to Isleworth; but once at least he remained to sleep on the steps of "an old grey church."

On other days he would wander up and down the river and in all the country round Richmond, whenever he could get away from the school. If he had any spare money, it was used to buy "new boots to make myself ready for new wanderings." This tremendous physical exertion was one outlet for the growing power within him. But his obsessing purpose was the religious one. He would stay in the dormitories at night telling the boys the story of Johannes and Theagenes, or something from Longfellow, or Mrs. Craik, or *The Wide, Wide World,* but they had generally fallen asleep before he came to the point, for he was slow of speech. He did much work for Mr. Jones in the neighbourhood, assisted at "tea-meetings" in a wooden

church at Turnham Green, and eventually preached there himself. "Theo," he wrote, with a trembling excitement and fear, "your brother has preached for the first time, last Sunday, in God's dwelling. . . . When I was standing in the pulpit I felt like someone who, emerging from a dark cave underground comes back to the friendly daylight, and it is a glorious thought that in the future wherever I shall come, I shall preach the Gospel; to do that *well*, one must have the Gospel in one's heart, may the Lord give it me."

Standing there in the pulpit, "we ourselves change in many respects," he said; "we are not what we once were, we shall not remain what we are now."

But yet—"How much shall I be changed, before I am changed!"

Chapter 2

In a bookshop at Dordrecht—attempts to enter Amsterdam University—in a school for Evangelists at Brussels—the Borinage—turns from religion to painting.

MR. JONES always continued his friend; but when Vincent came back to Etten for Christmas he was easily persuaded not to return, since it was clear that such a life was leading him nowhere. Uncle Vincent found him a place in a large bookshop and publishing firm at Dordrecht, and off he went at once to the little river-town where the brothers Cuyp had lived and worked. He lodged, with a schoolmaster, above a grocer's shop, and worked in the store on the Scheffer's Plein from nine in the morning until one o'clock at night. But he did not then go at once to bed, but continued, quite regularly, his habit of taking exercise at curious times, and wrote for his brother vivid sketches of the town on winter nights.

On Sundays he went to see Scheffer's pictures in the museum—"never to be forgotten"—and visited all the churches, in one of which the voice of the clergyman crying, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem," echoed round his mind till it became changed into, "O Zundert, Zundert," and he was filled with despair.

But he did come to Zundert once again. His father

had written to him that Aerssen, their old gardener, was dying, and Vincent longed to see him once more. So one Saturday he took the last train from Dordrecht to Oudenbosch, and walked through the night towards his birthplace, a distance of about fifteen miles. The way took him across "heaths and pinewoods, and moors extending far and wide," and past the strange t'Heike—an old settlement of gypsy-like creatures descended from Spaniards and ruffians—and other familiar places, till he came to the churchyard of Zundert, where he waited for the sunrise. Then, calling at the cottage, he learnt, from his son Hein, that Aerssen was dead.

"Where do the peasants get their strength from?" he asked Theo, and turned more passionately than ever to the Bible. He could not pass a church without weeping, so much he longed that it would be granted to him to preach the word of God. "It is my fervent prayer and desire that the spirit of my father and grandfather may rest upon me, and that it may be given me to become a Christian and a Christian Labourer, that my life may resemble more and more the lives of those named above, for behold the wine is good and I do not desire a new one." "Theo, boy, brother whom I love, I have such a fervent longing for it," he cried, "but how can I reach it?" Theo in his turn was suffering at this time from some unfortunate love-affair, and when he came over from The Hague—for he was working there now—they renewed their oaths of friendship. "Let us have as few secrets as possible from each other. Brothers should not have any."

At last the uncles conspired together to give Vincent

his chance of entering the Church. Uncle Jan, the Admiral, gave him a home in his house at Amsterdam; Uncle Stricker gave him some lessons, and procured him tuition from Mendes da Costa, the great classical scholar; and Uncle Cor's art gallery on the corner of the Leidschestraat and the Keizersgracht was at his disposal for recreation. The plan seems to have been entirely theirs, and Vincent may have shown a little diffidence, but they easily swept it away. He went up to Amsterdam with Theo one day in March to talk these things over. In the evening walking with Uncle Cor to the station, they passed through the flower-market. "It is a good thing," he said, "to love flowers, and evergreens, and fir-trees, and hedges of hawthorn, they were with us from the beginning." So unquenchable was his feeling for the heart of life, even at this time.

In the middle of May 1877, Vincent went off to Amsterdam, to "put the hand to the plough." Only Uncle Vincent, from his sick-bed at Prinsenhage, uttered warnings that the plan was bound to fail, and the parents themselves wondered if, after so much drifting, it would be possible to pursue a regular course of study. However, he installed himself at the Navy Yard, where the ships, the wharfs, and all the river-life, the moving sails, the still houses, churches, trees—everything in the place, with all its changing moods, delighted him. From his room he could hear the tramp, tramp of the men arriving at the wharf in the morning, or leaving at night—"I think there are about 3,000 of them, the sound of their footsteps is like the roaring of the sea."

As usual he walked, tirelessly, all over and round the town, every inch of which he came to know. On

Sundays he went from church to church, from service to service, and his constant anxiety was how to save money for the collections. Sometimes he had to change stamps at a tobacconist's. Once he is said to have thrown his watch and gloves into the plate; his sister, who records the tale, thinks it was a sign of absent-mindedness; it was surely rather a deliberate gesture of defiance against the poverty that mocked his longing to be charitable. Such acts indicate neither madness nor eccentricity, but logical despair. Often he visited Uncle Cor to see his pictures, and very often he was at Uncle Stricker's to receive instruction and help from him, and sometimes there he met his married cousin, K., and her husband, Vos. Every day he came to Mendes in the old Jewish quarter to take Latin and Greek lessons, for he was labouring desperately to be ready in time for the State Examination for admittance to the University. They all strove to encourage him, "but Greek lessons in the heart of Amsterdam, in the heart of the Jewish quarter, on a very close and sultry summer afternoon, with the feeling that many difficult examinations await you, arranged by very learned and cunning professors, I can tell you they make one feel more oppressed than the Brabant cornfields, that are beautiful on such a day." After Christmas would come "that terrible Algebra and Mathematics"; however, "I must cling to the Church for aid and to the book-shops."

But when Christmas was gone he was bound to admit that "it is certainly very doubtful if I shall ever succeed," and only a despairing wish not to fail his uncles kept him going till the middle of the summer had come again. He was hopelessly impatient, and

longed to go straight to the practical mission work which was his real purpose. He failed, logically enough, to see the connection between Latin grammar and labour for the poor. Yet still he strove to fight against distractions, the temptation to go walking, or to start drawing pictures on the paper which he ought to be writing exercises upon—for he had fallen into that habit again. Sometimes when he worked his brain began to reel, and he suddenly wondered, "Where am I, what am I doing, where am I going?"

Indeed he hardly knew. He only knew that there was a great power in him striving to find its purpose. Two ways of life had been open to him—the religious one, to which in the Zundert Pastorie he was born, and the critical circle of art and letters, to which his uncles had introduced him. While he was working in this latter circle there had begun to grow in him a great spiritual austerity to which such business was profoundly distasteful. For though the artists and the writers, who had helped to form his mind, had "all of them something of the Spirit of the Resurrection and the Life," it was only to clear that the dealers and the booksellers were more than all men separated from that spirit. The other alternative was to take up the life of his father, and in the violence of his passion for Christianity he believed that he found the proper satisfaction for his power—until, as was now to appear, it grew too great even for that object.

Mendes advised him at last, in July, to abandon his attempt to enter the University. He must have been relieved to have someone else making the decision for him. So ended what had begun with so much enthusiasm. "It is the worst time I ever lived through," he said

afterwards. "How miserable was the result, how ridiculous the whole undertaking, how utterly foolish. I shudder still when I think of it."

Again he went back to his father, who again tried to find rest for his restless son. It happened that the good Mr. Jones of Isleworth came to visit them for a few days, and they all went together to Brussels, where it was arranged that Vincent should join Mr. Bokma's school for evangelists. He stayed in Etten till September, and spent the time reading, or taking long walks across the heath with his little brother Cor, collecting heather for the rabbits or making maps with him of the villages to send to Theo. Then, when the time came, he went away to Brussels.

There he was the most advanced pupil, but was "not submissive." When the arranged three months were up, he was given no nomination. He became nervous and excitable and sleepless. In a geography book, he had been reading about the miners in the Borinage,[1] and it seemed that there was the very place where his power could find its purpose, among people whose literal movement was "from darkness to light." Like Goethe and Heine he found in the miner a symbol of something that was finest in life. His father, hearing of the state he was in, came from Etten with the intention of bringing him home, but, after talking the matter over,

[1] The "Black Country" of south Belgium. Vincent's interest in the miner's life had also been roused by a reading of Dickens' *Hard Times*. Just at this same time the Belgian artist, Constantin Meunier, also discovered in the Borinage his proper vocation, by turning at the age of fifty, from the composition of religious abstractions to a study of the worker's life in all its aspects. Vincent admired his pictures, which reminded him of the work of his friend Van Rappard.

he decided to let Vincent go, at his own risk, into the Borinage.

While at Brussels he felt he would like to begin "making rough sketches of the many things that I meet on my way, but as it would probably keep me from my real work, it is better not to begin it."

In December he installed himself at Paturages near Mons. He visited the sick, gave Bible lectures, and performed all his work so satisfactorily that the committee repented of its previous decision and gave him a temporary nomination for six months at Wasmes, at fifty francs a month. It was the first success he had ever had. He became an "enthusiast." Heart and soul he threw himself into all the practical part of his work. When a pit accident occurred, he was prompt with his services, and tore up what was left of his underclothes for bandages. He left his boarding-house in contempt for its luxury, and retired to a hovel. He held prayer-meetings in a derelict dance-hall called the Salon du Bébé. He went from one excess to another in his frenzied desire to humble himself, to *"mourir à soi-même."* So set was he upon the need of curing his own soul that it is doubtful if he had any eye upon the objects of his "love." His zeal came at last to a fatal conclusion. In a final ecstasy of religion, he performed literally the teaching of Jesus. His possessions were few enough, in all conscience, but he gave them away —his clothes, his money, and his bed. Doing this, he did nothing more than satisfy his own personal desire; the action was an embarrassment to everybody concerned, and nobody was in more need of his bed than himself. George Moore has drawn attention to the essential egoism of both the saint and the artist. Van

Gogh, combining in one man the essence of both these identities, presents an unusually complete example of the phenomenon. From the moment when the word of Renan told him that he must "die unto himself," he was seized with an insatiable longing to achieve that whole and perfect austerity in the soul which led him at last to the logical conclusion of self-inflicted death. That holy virtue of "self-denial" is by a strange paradox the most vital act in the development of "self." This mission-year of Vincent's was the most "selfish" year he lived. He could not dare to endanger that integrity, that perfection of self-hood for which he strove, by any sort of compromise whatever. Civilisation, this "social" life which men have been at such pains to build, is a system of convenient compromise, and decorous unselfishness. It is the saint-artist's Everlasting No, from which he is bound to turn away. And Vincent turned away. He indulged now the final egoism of a saint, and abandoned all care for his personal cleanliness. He blacked his face with coal-dust, and dressed himself in sacking. When the Rev. Rochelieu came for inspection, he was dismissed. It had been a conflict between violent forces. Gradually his passion to be a member of the Church died in him. Clericalism and academicalism had opposed him too long, and they became his bitter enemies.

With that hatred there came a natural dread of going home. Moreover his sense of practical religion was still strong, and he resolved to stay like a labourer among the poor. But what was he to do? He had no work, and again, just as when Ursula had said "No" to him, he felt himself drifting into the dreaded futility. So he walked to Brussels to ask the advice of his friend

Mr. Pietersen, an evangelist who was also an amateur painter. Tired and hot and dirty, he stood on the doorstep of the house, and when the daughter opened the door and saw him she ran away screaming; but Pietersen received him with great kindness, entertained him, and took him to the studio, where they discussed each other's pictures—for Vincent had brought with him some of the sketches of miners which he had lately been making. When, on his advice, Vincent had returned to the Borinage, Pietersen wrote to the parents a letter in which he remarked with great insight—"Vincent gives me the impression of somebody who stands in his own way."

Back in the Borinage he went on with his drawing, having nothing better to do. Mr. Tersteeg had sent him a sketch-book and a box of paints. Winter came on, and he was absolutely destitute. It is impossible to conceive the anguish of his mind and body in those terrible months. Some strange motive prompted him to wander away on a walking-tour. Almost nothing is known of his life at the time; he disappears out of sight, as though to endure in secret the torment of one last and greatest ordeal. He travelled towards the Pas de Calais, and found himself drawn on to Courrières, where Jules Breton, the celebrated artist, was living, shedding lustre over all the neighbourhood. He resolved to make his acquaintance, but, when he got there, "the outside of the studio was rather disappointing, as it was quite newly built of bricks of a Methodist regularity, of an inhospitable, chilly and irritating aspect." He lacked the courage to knock on the door, and turned back home. There was no money in his pocket, but he begged crusts of bread here and there

in exchange for his drawings. It was deep winter, and he had to sleep on abandoned wagons, piles of faggots, haystacks. He got back to the Borinage, overcome with fatigue and sores, but went on drawing more and more, though he had still resolved nothing. In July, after a silence of nearly a year, he wrote a letter to Theo of the profoundest and most exquisite thoughtfulness. In it he is feeling his way tentatively towards a new life whose philosophy is beyond any mere system of religion, or the reading of poems, or the looking at pictures, but finds an essential truth in all these things. The power in him was making one last struggle to be free, the power which was the cause of all this restlessness, these wanderings, this "idleness"—for with that even Theo had reproached him; and he replied that he was a man, "idle in spite of himself, who is inwardly consumed by a great longing for action, who does nothing, because it is impossible for him to do anything, because he seems to be imprisoned in some cage, because he does not possess what he needs to make him productive, because the fatality of circumstances brings him to that point; such a man does not always know what he could do, but he feels by instinct; 'yet I am good for something, my life has an aim after all, I know that I might be quite a different man!' How can I then be useful, of what service can I be! There is something inside of me, what can it be!"

Before the summer had gone much farther he had discovered the answer. He dared at last to know that he was an artist. He wrote in haste to Theo to send him all the engravings from Millet he could get to make copies from; he wrote for exercise-books from Mr. Tersteeg; and soon he was "in a rage of work." "Do

not fear for me now," he says, in a great cry of deliverance, "it is such a good thing when a man has found his work."

He was twenty-seven years old, and he had ten more years to live.

Chapter 3

Conversion—"K."—the Everlasting No—Settles at The Hague —Mauve and Tersteeg—Sien—destruction of the Ryswyk Mill.

VINCENT'S CHANGE from religion to art is a reverse of the process which happened in John Donne, but there is a resemblance in the two events. Both men were remarkable for their truculent conduct in the face of life, the unusual fierceness of their energy and of their personal power. In both cases the change was not a matter of conversion or alteration of integral character, but only a change of objects upon which their power worked, the power itself being constant. Theo, remembering the Ryswyk Mill, and the time when they had agreed in so many things, once said, "Since then you have changed so much, you are not the same any longer." But Vincent replied, "You must not think that I disavow things. I am rather faithful in my unfaithfulness, and though changed I am the same."

Vincent was the embodiment of the power of life in its most fierce urgency, ever pressing forward, on and on, against resisting circumstances and other lives. He was like the "majestic river," searching even in division

of itself for whatever sea might prove its true home of waters; and like the river, "a foiled circuitous wanderer," too great to be contained in the ordinary channels. The progress of power is inevitably involved with tragedy; for the laws of life make no provision for those who would be greater than life.

Such, though, was his fearless purpose. "I feel a power in me," he wrote, "which I must develop, a fire that I may not quench, but must keep ablaze, though I do not know to what result it will lead me, and shouldn't wonder if it were a gloomy one. In times like these what must one wish? What is relatively the happiest fate?"

But he knew that no answer to that question could change the laws that were above him, and, with a full sense of his destiny, he added, "It is better to be the conquered than the conqueror. It is better to be Prometheus than Jove."

For to the power of man the world answers an "Everlasting No." "Almost everyone," wrote Vincent, "who seeks his own way, has behind him or beside him an eternal discourager." The life of an artist is a conflict between the integrity of his desires and the world's conventional "No." It is the tragedy of helpless power. But at the same time the event as it progresses seems to show, and other examples too suggest the truth of all these paradoxical axioms—one could quote them without number—that "it is better to be Abel than Cain—better to be the slain than the slayer." Vincent wrote these words eight years before he killed himself.

After spending several months of eager work in Brussels, where he formed an important friendship with Van Rappard, Vincent came back to his home at

Etten in the April of 1881, and settled down quietly to drawing the Brabant country and its types. When he had been there a little time, there came to stay at the Pastorie Uncle Stricker's lovely daughter, K., whom he had sometimes seen at their house in Amsterdam. Her husband, Vos, had just died, and she was left a young mourning widow with a little son. Vincent, fresh from his long and terrible exposure in a winter-world, fell desperately in love with her. She, new in her grief, was buried in the past. After several months of waiting, in which he tried to approach her through friendship with the little boy, he declared his love, and asker her to marry him; to which she replied, "No, never, never." Instead of being deterred, his love became a passion as consuming as that of Keats, and for three months he poured forth to Theo, in Paris, letter after letter, radiant with happiness and faith in his love.

I must ask you if it astonishes you in the least that there is a love serious and passionate enough not to be chilled by many "no, never nevers"?

I suppose far from astonishing you this will seem very natural and reasonable.

For love is something positive, so strong, so real that it is as impossible for one who loves to take back that feeling as it is to take his own life. If you answer this by saying: "But there are people who put an end to their own lives," I simply answer you this: "I really do not think I am a man with such inclinations."

Life has become very dear to me, and I am very glad that I love. My life and my love are one. "But you are confronted by a 'no, never, never' " is your

reply. And my answer to that is: "Old boy, for the present I consider that 'no, never, never' as a block of ice that I press to my heart to thaw."

K., in the meantime, returned to Amsterdam, and all communications were cut off. Not only she, but the whole of Vincent's family were opposed to his love. Only Theo sent his encouragement, and little Willemien from Haarlem wrote letters secretly reporting K.'s movements. Vincent's position in the family was reaching a crisis. With bitterness in their hearts the two good parents saw their son growing into something which they knew they could not understand. They looked with suspicion on the books he was reading, so he begged them to glance at only a few pages of Michelet's *L'Amour* for themselves; but they replied with a story of "a great uncle who was infected with French ideas, and who took to drink, and so they insinuate that I will follow the same career." But when the Rev. ten Kate translated Goethe's *Faust* they read it, "for now that a clergyman has translated it, it cannot be so very immoral." What does that mean? asked Vincent in despair. There were unpleasantnesses over his method of dress, and now, when he persisted in his love for K., they accused him of trying to break up the family. Matters came to a head when, on Christmas Day, Vincent refused to go to church. A violent quarrel took place, abusive language was used, and Vincent stormed out of the house.

Already before this he had managed, with the financial help of Theo, to visit Amsterdam. With marvellous hope in his heart, he went one evening searching along the canal where the house was, till he came to their

door and rang the bell. The family was still at dinner. As soon as they knew who their visitor was, K. left the table, and they cleared away her plate; but that did not deceive him, and he noted the little detail as a comedy, a farce. After a time he asked, "Where is K.?" and they all repeated the question to each other round the table, asking "Where is K.?" till Aunt Stricker said, "K. is out." They went on talking about other things, but when dinner was finished he was left alone with his uncle and aunt. Then he repeated the question, "Where is K.?" and lies and excuses and refusals went from side to side, till Vincent stretched his hand out into the flame of the lamp saying, "Let me see her for as long as I can keep my hand in the flame." His uncle dashed the lamp to the ground.

Then they told him finally that he should never see her again because she, in fact, herself so wished it, that she even felt an aversion for him, and that as soon as she heard he had come she had left the house.

He was absolutely desolate. He stumbled out on to the canal. He "had the feeling of being stunned, a feeling as if he had been standing too long against a cold, hard, whitewashed churchwall." And when at last he understood that she meant by her "no, never, never" that she could in truth never love him, it seemed to him that in those words the whole world was speaking its opposition to all his desires, and that her "no, never, never" was the absolute and Everlasting No.

He looked down into the canal and thought of death. In his emptiness, his unutterable misery, he thought: "Yes, I can understand that there are people who drown themselves," but another thought, a "manly" thought of Millet's, followed that one in his

mind—that suicide was the deed of a dishonest man. So he turned away, and, with all the speed possible, journeyed to The Hague.

He roamed all round the night streets longing for his life to become full again. A terrible battle was going on in himself because he had so often said "she and no other." Then he said to himself, "Who is the master, the logic or I; is the logic there for me or am I there for the logic?" And having said that he had not far to seek, for he found a woman, who, though neither young, nor beautiful, nor remarkable, reminded him of "some curious figure by Chardin or Frère, or perhaps Jan Steen." She was "something over which life has passed," and, himself being suddenly made all alive, he went with her to her home to sleep with her.

In that night Vincent turned on his past and destroyed it. It was not the first time he had slept with a woman; but it was the first time that he did so knowing that the act was good and right. Everything that was false in the religion of his fathers dropped away from him. He became a "revolutionary" and a "modern." Henceforward he lived in a world beyond good and evil, from which standards with the names of "moralities" were banished for ever, and no judgments were valid save those which discriminated between half living and fulness of life.

He had chosen The Hague, a "royal residence with its appropriate fashions," because Mauve had befriended him and shown a genuine interest in his wife's strange cousin. Of the art world, Mr. and Mrs. Mesdag were the undisputed monarchs, having recently confirmed their title on the triumphant completion of their

remarkable Panorama of Scheveningen. The Panoroma, then much in vogue, seems to have been a curious attempt to justify the potentialities of painting in the face of the new photography. The work of the Mesdags at least has the practical merit of supplying us with exact information about the village which Vincent so often visited. Vincent himself declared that the Panorama was "a work that deserves all respect," although "there are things that I rank infinitely higher than that kind of energy." Great artist as he believed Mesdag to be, Vincent noted in the man and his circle "a substitution of material for moral grandeur." Although he strenuously avoided that circle, he came into contact with Weissenbruch, and, of the younger set, with de Bock, Jules Backhuyzen, Van der Weele; while with Breitner, who subsequently became a painter of real distinction, he was very friendly. At the start, Mauve was almost enthusiastic, and even lent him money to buy a few pieces of furniture for the garret which he took at the top of a house on the Schenkweg, a dreary new street on the edge of the town. He owned this new independence to Theo. Already, in the Borinage days, he had been sending Vincent money, but secretly, through his father, without letting him know. From now on he sent Vincent regularly a hundred and fifty francs a month—approximately the equivalent of a university student's allowance, on which an economically minded man should have been able to live—and whenever it was possible he sent him more, bearing all the impatient appeals of Vincent without a grudge. Theo, too, was a saint, but belonging to a different order. Labouring together they achieved the heights of a shining austerity,

Vincent, the man of faith, sacrificing his brother, the world, to his abstract craving to achieve self-perfection; Theo, the man of works, sacrificing his health, career, desires, his very life, that it might be possible.

Thus, at the beginning of 1882, Vincent could claim that he had his own studio; and sometimes he visited the studio of Mauve. It is certain that the latter had been poisoned with lies about him by Mr. Tersteeg, and, when he saw some of Vincent's drawings, he was genuinely surprised at his ability and wished to help him. Unfortunately he was himself in a nervous state at the time, and men of such vastly different temperaments were bound to irritate each other. Within a fortnight the crash came. Mauve gave him some plaster-casts to draw from. "Man, do not speak to me again about plaster, for I cannot stand it," screamed Vincent at him, and threw them into the coal-bin. He thought to himself he would draw from casts only when they became whole and white again, and when there were no more hands and feet of living beings to draw from. Mauve never forgave him; but Vincent used to roar with laughter when he told the story afterwards, and, though he resented Mauve's unreasonably persistent resentment, he never lost his admiration for him as an artist, and when the latter died he painted for his widowed cousin his lovely "Souvenir de Mauve" —a blossoming tree.

At this time his Uncle Cor, feeling some little pity for him, commissioned him to draw twelve sketches of the town for two and a half guilders each. These were almost the only pictures he ever sold in his life; but Mauve was careful to let him know that his uncle could find little charm in them, and had only done it

to assist a poor relation. Mr. Tersteeg saw to it that there were no further such orders. He even attempted to prevent Theo from sending Vincent money. If he ever came to the Schenkweg, it was only to say such things as, "Oh, that painting of yours, it will be like everything else you undertook, it will come to nothing." In Vincent's life he was the denying spirit, "the Devil who said No," the "everlasting discourager that every man who seeks his own way has behind him or beside him."

It was an unlovely partnership, the one between Mauve and Tersteeg. When they were not discouraging his work, they insulted his person. Mauve, who was always imitating somebody, used to imitate his speech, and Vincent quietly replied: "If you had spent rainy nights in the streets of London like me, or cold nights in the Borinage, hungry, homeless, feverish, you would also perhaps have such ugly lines in your face and a husky voice." But what all men really feared in him was his sheer nakedness, his uncovered honesty. It is significant that of all the characters that came from the mind of "mysterious Shakespeare," the one whom he chose for special admiration was Kent—Kent, whose talent was to "deliver a plain message bluntly," whose "occupation" was to be "plain," and who, "having more man than wit" about him, found himself in the stocks. "To plainness honour's bound"—whatever may come of it. Again and again Vincent's disasters can be traced to his actual inability to conceal any part of himself, or what he felt. Such a concealment would be a lie against his very soul, against that integrity which he guarded with passion; but it could have no other than a tragic conclusion. It is a sorry world we live in,

where tact, a mere refinment of dishonesty, is the first necessity of social accomplishments and convenient happiness. Vincent puts it more strongly, saying: "In order to keep up a certain rank one is obliged to commit certain villainies and falsehoods—willingly and knowingly, premeditatedly." He who had resolved to "die unto himself," was "not submissive." The first cause, which in every case provoked the enmity of the world, was his own original and perfect goodness. He would even assume a "mask of reserve, of almost roughness," to save himself from flattery. To deal with such a man, to have intercourse with his mind, men must have the power to recognise a simplicity which ordinary sophisticated minds are not capable of understanding. Even Theo hardly saw this; Tersteeg was stone-blind. Vincent was as lonely as King Lear when he recognised the truth.

He found nothing in the life of wealthy or educated or well-born men that could compare with the riches of humbleness. As a painter he claimed to be a labourer. "Being a labourer," he wrote, "I feel at home in the labouring class and more and more I will try to live and take root there. . . . I feel that my work lies in the heart of the people, that I must keep close to the ground, that I must grasp life to the quick, and make progress through many cares and troubles." He came even to see that it was well that he had not married K. With her his life would have gone by in the drawing-rooms of the Mesdags. So, seeking confirmation of the change that had taken place—for he went on from one change to another—he took into his home a woman called Sien.

She was a prostitute, and her mother was a prosti-

tute; her brother was living with a prostitute; she was bringing up her little girl of eleven to be a prostitute, and she was pregnant with another child whose father had just deserted her. She was exactly what he wanted. Such people, he felt, should rather be termed "sisters of charity." She was in misery, and a fit object for his wealth of pity. He would explain to her her failings, and bring her into healthfulness. There was so much likeness in their manners that before her, of all people, he could drop his "mask of roughness." "There is nothing striking about her, she is just an ordinary woman of the people who for me has something sublime." He adored her wretchedness; when it was all over, he claimed that he had put his serenity "in worship of sorrow" and not in illusions. He was bowing down, like Dostoevsky's hero, to all the suffering in humanity.

Still more than in the Borinage this act of charity was a step towards the perfection of himself. Again—so constant is this strange contradiction—he put himself into the deepest humility to exalt his personality. For the very Sien herself, he had no eyes; he neither saw what she was, nor wished to see. In the knowledge of his charity towards her, he had his satisfaction. And it took nearly two years to persuade him that one who was foul-mouthed, coarse, and illiterate, who was marked with small-pox and infected with venereal disease, who was an habitual drunkard and smoked cigars, who was a spiteful and ungrateful intriguer—that such a one was useless to him.

It is as profitless to wonder over this as over the other strange wanderings in Vincent's taste. With all his struggling power, his passion for integrity, he was

simply the humblest of all men. There was something prostrate in his admiration for pictures that are frankly unadmirable, and books of the slightest merit. He looked on Israëls, Mauve, Mesdag, Millet, Monticelli, Braekeleer, Leys, Scheffer, Meissonier as masters whom he could never hope to approach, and, for him, Mrs. Beecher Stowe was "at the head of modern civilisation." It is true that he combined with this the rarest power of discerning and appreciating what is the very best; but that makes the thing more strange. The fact is that for Vincent the critical mind was simply not a valuable one. "Admire as much as you can," he wrote, "most people do not admire enough." He was impatient when people used the word "mediocre," and replied that he himself was quite content to be a mediocre artist—differing, for once, from Keats—and that the mediocre must be given its due. For him the "truth" of a religion meant nothing, it was only important that men should believe in it. Men were not "good" or "bad"—they were either half alive, or all alive. And "æsthetic" judgment was something purely imaginary. "Objects" were simply there for the power of man to work upon; a "critic" of "objects" was wasting his time. He was another Everlasting No.

So the striving Vincent looked at Millet's pictures, and gave Sien a home, and, when he called them both "sublime," he was not saying anything that was not true.

He did not break the news at once to Theo that he had taken a woman into his house, but, when he did so, he did so very dramatically. Theo at first held back a little, showed how much of his father there was still in him. He might well have protested that when he

undertook the support of Vincent he had not bargained for this. He might well have put before Vincent a thought such as this one of Thomas Mann's—that you must die to life to be utterly a creator; but a torrent of persuasion from Vincent overcame him. He did, though, manage to hold him back from his reckless resolve to marry her; and on his summer visit he must have wondered still more when he had seen her. However, in the following January an irresistible event confirmed his conversion. He found a derelict woman himself. It is true there was a difference; for the gentle Theo had found a gentle woman, while Vincent had possessed himself of a harridan. Now it was Vincent's turn, though, to get in a little wisdom on Theo. Naturally he was profoundly happy that his brother had shown himself capable of a great and good act, but "involuntarily I have thought it over and said to myself—what will people say about it?" Then, that shot being fired, the relations between them became closer than ever.

Thus the two sons of Dominee van Gogh became, in Christian charity, the masters of mistresses. Somehow —for Theo was a great diplomatist—they broke the news to their father. Through Theo's mediation a superficial *rapprochement* with Vincent had already taken place. And now the Dominee, in a generous act that must have cut right across his past way of thinking, decided to accept the situation. He even sometimes sent parcels of old clothes that included wintercoats for the women; but he probably guessed that the affairs would not last long. Meanwhile the brothers commented to each other on how funny it was to think

that Theo's slender income was being divided among six people.

Once he had constituted his household, Vincent's life in the Schenkweg was fairly uneventful. He worked ceaselessly, mostly at figures, but he undertook a lot of sketching as well, and was often out in obscure parts of the town, or camping whole days in the dunes, or going down to the shore at Scheveningen—the most frequently painted corner of all this world. For recreation he continued his reading, and acquired a prodigious knowledge of European literature. When he read the diary of Gerard Bilders, a painter who died in his youth, he took heart from that tragic story by seeing how much an advantage it was in his own life to have became a painter only after he had lost all romantic illusions.

But by June his health was broken. Sien had handed on her disease to him, years of exposure had destroyed his strength that was once so great, constant starvation now in these months of poverty weakened him further—for he always preferred going without food to going without paint; and in the same enthusiasm he thought nothing of sitting for three hours in pouring rain, for the sake of "getting an effect." He had believed himself immune from all weaknesses, but began now to learn, as the Promethean tragedy unfolded itself, that "Nature has fixed laws against which it is fatal to struggle." He entered the City Hospital on the Brouwersgracht, and remained there for three weeks. He was in great pain; but at the same time Sien was approaching her confinement, and, in the face of that, men's sufferings were nothing. She went away to the academic hospital at Leyden, and in great danger

gave birth to a boy. A few weeks later, weak from all their sicknesses, the family came together again, increased by one.[1] The cradle of the latter was a source of great joy for Vincent. You could not fool with a thing like that, he said, not even the slanderous Tersteeg, who was now calling him "vicious," could be flippant at the sight of that. But the dreariness of this life was weighing more and more heavily. Tax-collectors came and fatuously demanded from him what it was very apparent that he did not possess; his creditors came and knocked him down. All these were further aspects of that phenomenon, the "No." So were the mockers and the railers whom he loathed, identifying himself with Zola's remark, "Si à présent je vaux quelque chose c'est que je suis seul et que je hais les niais, les impuissants, les cyniques, les railleurs idiots et bêtes." So were the men with a "village-policeman" mentality—Theo's phrase—the "constables" who go about stopping things to keep themselves amused—responsibility vested in stupidity, that was an unanswerable "No." Mauve, Mr. Tersteeg, men who were in a position to forward what they obstructed, who did not know "what it is to believe"; the men who suspected him of "amateurism"; the family, defined as "a fatal combination of persons with contrary interests, each of which is opposed to the rest, and two or more are of the same opinion only when it is a question of combining together to hinder another member"; poverty which "prevents growth"; "technique," which came so maddeningly between his desires and their

[1] Making two children in all. But the number has been prodigiously increased by various romancers. Incidentally Vincent was never a father—to his great distress.

performance; the illness of his body that was aggravated by the fury of his work; all these things repeated to him those unforgotten words, "No, never, never." And, strangely confusing to the whole issue of things, he was himself, so Theo said, his own worst enemy; and just those very qualities that made for his greatness were themselves responsible for his undoing. There was a "No" in very heart of himself.

He loathed critics and mockers, but he adored such a man as Millet, who was "the type of a believer." "One must not be a City man, but a Country man, however civilised one may be. I cannot express it exactly. There must be a *je ne sais quoi* in a man, that keeps his mouth shut and makes him active—a certain aloofness even when he speaks—I repeat, an inward silence, which leads to action." In Carlyle's words—"It was the Devil who said No, it is God who says Yes"; and Vincent says, "Mysteries remain, sorrow or melancholy remain, but that everlasting negative is balanced by the positive work which thus is achieved after all."

He was twenty-nine years old. Ten years had gone since that day when they walked together to the Ryswyk Mill. He went now again to look at it, to recapture if possible the poetry of that time—but the Mill was no longer there! The Ryswyk Mill, that such a memory consecrated, had been pulled down! It was a terrifyingly pregnant symbol; but his marvellous power of poetry helped him away from that terror, and, shrugging his shoulders, "As for me, brother," he said, "though the mill has gone and the years and my youth are gone as irrevocably, deep within me has

arisen again the feeling that there is some good in life, and that it is worth while to exert oneself and to try to take life seriously."

For the thought had come to him that though the mill was no longer there the wind that had moved its sails was still blowing.

Chapter 4

Drenthe—the Everlasting Yes—Nuenen—family difficulties—Margot Begemann—peasants—the heath fire—visit to Amsterdam—the girl at the mill and the priests.

AS THE SUMMER of the following year—1883—drew to its end, another crisis was approaching. The faith which he put in Sien was one of his answers to the "No," but she was too frail a vessel for so heavy a charge. Slowly he was forced to Swift's conclusion—that it is impossible to save people against their own will. And it certainly was against Sien's. It looks as if she was bored to death with Vincent, and just waiting for the chance of escaping back to her more adventurous life; but the indirect ways that she followed to let him know as much perhaps show some stumbling regard for his feelings. When he perceived the truth, he perceived that a great ideal had been ruined. He had put his serenity in "worship of sorrow," and sorrow had crushed him. She, who should have helped him answer the "No," had added herself to the "Noes."

They decided to part; and long after they had parted he persisted in pitying her, and believing that he had felt a serene impassionate love for her, and that not she had failed him but the world that had made

her thus. "She has never seen what is good," he said, "so how can she be good?" In the bottom of his heart he must have felt an unspeakable relief. He was, besides, weary of the town, and longing to be free of it. He had heard so much of Drenthe from Rappard, and wanted to go there. Romantic phrases came into his mind, he longed to "replunge himself once more in nature's serenity on the heath"; his highest wish was "to live for a time with a peasant, far far away in the country, far away, alone with nature." He set all his hopes on Drenthe.

For one last time before parting from Sien he went out into the country, hoping, perhaps, to feel the Ryswyk wind; and his walk that day gave rise to the following wonderful piece of writing in his letter to Theo:

> I had spoken to the woman as I wrote to you—we felt that in the future it would be impossible for us to stay together, ay, that we should make each other unhappy, yet we felt on both sides how strongly we are attached to each other, and then I went out in the country far away, to have a talk with nature. Well, I walked to Voorburg and from there to Leidschendam. You know the scenery there, splendid trees, majestic and serene, side by side with horrible green toy summer-houses, and all the absurdities the heavy fancy of retired Dutchmen can imagine in the shape of flower plots, arbours and porches. The houses, most of them very ugly, some, however, old and stately. Now at that moment, high over the meadows, boundless as the desert, one mass of clouds after the other came sailing on, and the wind in the very first place broke

against the row of country houses, with their clumps of trees on the other side of the canal, bordered by the black cinder path. Those trees, they were superb; there was drama in each *figure* I was going to say, but I mean in each tree. But the whole scene together was more beautiful still than those scourged trees viewed apart, because at that moment even those absurd little summer-houses assumed a curious character, dripping with rain and dishevelled.

It seemed to me an image of how even a man of absurd manners and conventions, or another full of eccentricities and caprice, may become a dramatic figure of peculiar type, if only real sorrow strikes him—a calamity touches him. And the thought crossed my mind, how society to-day in its fall, at moments seen against the light of a renewal, stands out as a large, gloomy silhouette.

Yes, for me, the drama of storm in nature, the drama of sorrow in life, is the most impressive.

"Society in its fall" was in fact Vincent's preoccupying thought when, after two years, he turned away from the town and travelled north to Drenthe. It was falling, at any rate, in his own mind. The first difficulty of an artist is to find the outward life of circumstances that best conforms with his inward mood, and so to form a unity that will bring about a state congenial to the creation of a work of art. To men of such passion as Keats and Van Gogh such a state is apparently impossible. Vincent's was in any case a hopelessly restless nature. When he was in the town he longed for the purity of the country, but when he was in the country he complained of being

out of touch with things. His austerity craved for solitude, but his humanity needed men. Social life was the saint-artist's Everlasting No from which he must turn aside, but with an equal strength the goodness of the saint and the manhood of the artist suffered a full-blooded craving for that social life. So there arises, in an exaggerated form, that conflict between the sensual and the ascetic, which makes such regular appearances, at any rate in poetry, that it seems to be an essential condition of creation. Langland, Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne, Milton, Marvell, Wordsworth—these are a few witnesses. Now, in Drenthe, Vincent brought his philosophy to the judgment of town and country. His concern was to persuade Theo of the matter, for in his own mind he was already sure. Theo, who had been all these years in the Paris branch of Goupil's, was in great difficulties. Vincent was urging him to follow his example to throw up his career and join him as a painter in Drenthe. Theo's resistance to such intensive persuasions as Vincent wrote him indicates much strength of will. It was probably for Vincent's own sake that he refused to throw away their only source of income and join his brother.

There now was Vincent, utterly separated from the world of towns, in a country almost desert, whose vast heaths and meadowlands stretched still more endlessly than in the Brabant of his childhood, their spaces only broken by the long canals, where barges bore their cargo of peat, or the incongruous ceremonies of a peasant funeral. Sometimes, in the centre of the heath, he found groups of dark cottages built of turf and sticks, and on their roofs sheep and goats were browsing. Round every settlement of men lay the infinite earth. In this immense plainness and huge waste

he was confirmed in his knowledge that the whole fabric of civilisation is a pitiful failure. The extremity of bitterness had brought him, like Lear, through the storm, to the contemplation of unsophisticated, naked humanity, and the perfect knowledge that this was "the thing itself." The conflict between sensualism and asceticism carries the sufferer at last outside itself into a state of austere mysticism, but which for Vincent at any rate held no more mystery than is contained in the absolute realisation of plain facts. Modern life was a "stagnation" which "had its origin in the giving up of principles, and in replacing the original by the conventional"; civilised society a system which had progressed so far into artificialities that the blood in a man's veins and the strength in his limbs were significant no more. The true object of Vincent's power became a search for the very life of Earth.

Earth speaks no "everlasting no." The ploughman ploughs, and his power turns to fruitfulness. In the "*foi du charbonnier*," said Vincent, there is an "everlasting *yes*."

He saw Earth and Man as a marvellous unity which made up the whole matter of life; not merely "linked," as Wordsworth, with original genius, had perceived a hundred years before, nor only related from the labour performed by the one on the other, but each of them sprung from the same source of life, flowing with the same spirit, beating with the same pulse. Drawing two pictures, one of some roots, the other of a woman, he "tried to put in the landscape the same sentiment as in the figure—clinging convulsively and passionately to the earth. . . . In that pale slender woman's figure as well as in the black gnarled and knotty roots, I wanted to express something of the struggle for life."

The success of Van Gogh as a painter lies in this: that he conveys to us exactly what we know from his letters that he wished to convey; "the thing represented" was "absolutely in agreement and one with the manner of representing"; and the thing represented was the life in living things.

From this time onwards he strove to acquire the character of peasant where before he had aspired to that of the saint. It was hardly more than a change in names, and a renewal of the power that was always urging forward to the perfection of self-hood. Modern artists and poets have generally preferred the medium of peasantry to that of saint, which savours too much of mediævalism and remote romance. (The strength which made the so-called Romantic Revival so unassailable was its totally unromantic characteristics.) Wordsworth and Hardy are the chief theorists in the large band which demonstrated the essentially superior and permanent value of "humble and rustic life." It is a strange gesture this—the turning of the men of finest taste and highest culture to the men of finest strength and simplest life. The first duty of a poet is to be the Peasant's Prophet, and if he fails to acknowledge in this way, or some other like it, his perception of, and contact with, the elements of life, his adornments and prettinesses and sophistication run the risk of forming part of that life of futilities above which Vincent, for one, was determined to lift himself.

It was not a romantic or sentimental whim that had first stirred an admiration of the peasant in him, but the actual contact with labour which his life in the Borinage constantly brought about. This was in the heat of his religious frenzy, but it may be that the

very miners whose condition had called forth his proselytising ardour were themselves responsible for his change to art, since his purpose in taking up drawing was to make a record of types and typical scenes. We have seen how this occupation triumphed over the other—as he had foreseen it might at the start. His purpose soon became more than the making of a record, when he found, with a dawn of light, that "it is a wonderful thing to draw a human being, something that lives." As an artist he looked imaginatively upon other men, upon the peasants among whom he would henceforth live, hoping to be numbered as one of themselves.

He believed that he had "a certain hardiness in common with the peasants." He liked to feel that in receiving an allowance from Theo he was taking weekly wages "like any labourer" in return for his work. To "wrestle with nature" was the artist's labour as well as the peasant's. Whenever it was possible he found analogies between their two ways of life, and believed that if he went close to the earth he would win its integrity. It was not far from the truth, and at any rate the idea satisfied him now; and when one of the villagers asked him what the life in London was like, he replied, with immediate precision; "In my opinion a simple farmer, *who works and works intelligently* is *the* civilised man, that it has always been so, and always will remain so." The man thought so, too.

All the same, by November the loneliness of Drenthe began to oppress him, and cold and hunger were making him ill again. He decided, quite suddenly, to go home for a little, and, one afternoon, started off, with a six-hours' walk across the heath, in a storm of rain and snow. And as he plodded on

through that bewildering hurricane, like the unthroned king, he thought: "I am disillusioned," but he thought too that he had perhaps been too far disenchanted, that he had lost the power of judging whether, for example, Theo was right or wrong to remain in the city, and he wondered, "Is it possible that I take gold for tinsel? Do I call withered a thing that is in full bloom?"

During his long absence from them the family had changed their home again. They were now settled at Nuenen, a small straggling village not far from Eindhoven in the south-east corner of Brabant. Eindhoven itself was hardly more than a village in those days, and the lack of communications, together with its distance from the cities, made Nuenen a very desolation. During winter there was great poverty and hardship among the peasants, who, for the most part, carried on a domestic trade in weaving; others of them were field-labourers in a land of idyllic beauty. Here as elsewhere, the Dominee's community was a tiny one. The Pastorie was a charming house facing the street, with a long narrow garden at the back filled with old trees and garden beds, and ending with a dark pond. Beyond the pond were the cornfields stretching out to the horizon; and far out in their very midst was an old abandoned church in a circle of trees. Various circumstances had left it unwanted by either community. A little after Vincent came the nave was pulled down, but the tower was left standing alone, and occurs in many of his pictures. A year later the Vandals, as he called them, pulled the tower down as well, and held a sale of the woodwork. He sketched

the scene of the sale, and then, later, painted the heap of ruins in the churchyard that remained, showing "how for ages the peasants have been laid to rest in the very fields which they dug up when alive. . . . And now those ruins tell me how a faith and a religion mouldered away, strongly founded though they were, but how the life and death of the peasants remain for ever the same, budding and fading regularly, like the grass and the flowers growing there in that churchyard ground."

And to-day, hardly the ruins are to be seen, almost nothing is left but his father's grave.

In a house immediately next door to the Pastorie lived a family called Begemann. They too had a garden leading down to the cornfields, parallel with that of the Pastorie; and a little gate was made between the two gardens, for the families became the closest friends. Mr. Begemann was an "elder" in the Dominee's church, and his three middle-aged sisters were the daily companions of Mrs. Van Gogh. There were also some children, who were friends of Cor's.

Although he had made his decision in some haste, Vincent must have warned them that he was coming home, for there is a tradition in the village that his father went in to Eindhoven by the carrier's cart to meet him. He would have been prepared for eccentricity in dress, but he was confronted by a tramp, covered with mud and in tatters. Before they could return to Nuenen, he had to buy his son a pair of new boots. As soon as the carrier had deposited them at the Pastorie, he spread the news round the village—that the Dominee had brought back with him the strangest creature alive. It simply never occurred to him that it

was the Dominee's own son. In fact his parents felt in secret such a shame of Vincent that they had never breathed a word to anyone of his existence—not even to the Begemanns, with whom they almost shared their lives.

If Vincent ever found out that rather terrible fact —that they had tried to disown him before their little world—it could hardly have added to the bitterness he felt on discovering that their understanding of him was as slight as ever. The good people gave him all the kindness they possessed, but he resented their inability to penetrate to the heart of his needs. Moreover his supreme egoism rode rough-shod over the heart of theirs. From Drenthe he had told Theo the conditions on which he would return home: "They decidedly would have to do what I want, they would have to trust that I had my reasons for it. If I said to them: you must pose, they ought to do so. Of course I would not ask anything unreasonable"; and now he had returned, and though they had resolved to allow him all his eccentricities, to endure, without complaining, whatever humiliation he put them to, he was not content. He wrote to Theo with terrible pathos. "They feel the same dread about taking me in the house as they would about taking a big rough dog. He would run into the room with wet paws . . . he will be in everybody's way. *And he barks so loud.* In short he is a dirty beast. . . ." And then he speaks another of the dark ironies that were forging a chain of fatal logic in his mind—"And then—the dog might bite—he might go mad, and the constable would have to come and shoot him." He resolved to go away again, anywhere; till one day they offered him a permanent

home, by converting the mangle-room into a studio where he could live and sleep—and, having no other plan, he stayed.

He adopted the policy of maintaining an absolute silence. If communication of any sort was necessary, he did it by writing notes. He did not even utter at meals, but used to take his plate into a corner, and, while spooning the food into his mouth with one hand, continued painting with the other. Such ceaseless labour at any rate removed their charge of idleness, but they lacked the faculty of understanding "the passion, and the frequent absorbedness, which everyone who paints, writes, or composes, must needs have." He felt a freezing coldness growing all round him, and was anguished to find himself in such a terrible solitude. He found that the spiritual austerity, from which he never flinched, was submitting his body with it to an austerity which that part of him would not be able to endure. "Except the few years which I can hardly understand myself, when I was confused by religious ideas—a kind of mysticism—leaving aside that period, I have always lived with a certain warmth. Now it is getting grimmer, and colder, and duller around me." So that he was led at this time into a strange visionary state, in which he saw himself as one who, having rejected the systems of his fathers, was moving from darkness to light. "I have a certain hope that my aspirations will not be vain, and that I shall see the white radiance before my eyes close."

Meanwhile, Theo, in Paris, was faced with the problem of keeping both parties at peace with each other, by writing to everybody from opposite points

of view. The result was disastrous, for Vincent came to feel that even his brother was against him, that Theo had joined the "anti-revolutionaries," and that, though they were fighting in the same battle, they were on different sides. When the new year of 1884 arrived, his isolation was complete. He looked sadly back to the Ryswyk Mill, and saw two figures, whom he could now hardly recognise—so like in their feelings, thoughts, and beliefs that they seemed to be one same man. Now there was such distance between them that they hardly seemed like brothers. He wrote cutting letters to Theo, complaining bitterly at his failure to sell his pictures, and suggesting they should go their separate ways for ever. And still Theo continued supplying him with money, and the correspondence never ceased.

Towards the end of January an accident occurred that ironically relieved the situation. His mother, getting out of the train at Helmond, slipped and broke her leg. She was sixty-four years old, and for some days it was uncertain what the issue might be. The doctor at once discovered that Vincent was an expert nurse—he had learnt the art in the Borinage—and he became the most important person in the house. The devotion and care he showed her were extraordinary; and when he was not by her side he continued his painting with the intensest zeal, and sometimes produced little pictures of the Reformed Church to amuse her with. It was a stroke of fortune that did much more to bring them together than any of Theo's plans, or their own deliberate sacrifices.

By May his mother was about again, and as his small quarters at the Pastorie were becoming inade-

quate for the continuance of his work, which now grew in abundance, he took a studio of his own further down the village. It was a garret in the house of the sexton of the Catholic church, a man called Schafrath, whose wife looked after him; but for another year Vincent lived on with his family, only working here during the day.

He had in the meantime made a number of friends in the neighbourhood, chiefly among the peasants, who still remember the astonishing liberality with which he distributed Theo's allowance, together with pieces of his own garments, among the poor. He was also very free in making presents of his pictures, but they were always surreptitiously destroyed as soon as he had gone. He had, besides, come into some contact with the various friends of the family who visited his mother during the months of her illness. Of one of these, Margot Begemann, the youngest of the sisters from next door, he became an intimate friend. She was about ten years older than he, and, apparently, had few attractions, but her meeting with Vincent caused a sudden release in her of lifelong repressions. She had never known anything but torment in her family, and, pathetic as the whole incident is, there is a tragic intensity in the cry she delivered, after the disaster. "I too have loved at last." It was one of the greatest tributes ever paid to Vincent in his lifetime. It may well be that emerging from that coldness he felt some love for her too. At least he felt the deepest pity. She was "a Cremona violin, spoilt by bad, bungling repairers."

They spent all the summer together, visiting the poor, or walking in the fields, or meeting each other

by the gate between their gardens. In August they declared their intention of marrying, and were met with the most violent opposition from the Begemann family. The unhappy woman, rebelling at last against the domination of her sisters, resolved to fight them to the death. As her mind had never been trained to the experience of even the mildest emotions, it at once showed signs of collapsing. Vincent consulted a doctor, warned her brother that she was in a dangerous condition, and told him that the family had not acted wisely in reproaching her with "being too old for that sort of thing." They paid no attention. Three days later she took poison. Somehow her life was saved, and she was hurried away to Utrecht, but not before the leading members of the Protestant community had suffered a surprising shock. With peculiar irrelevance the Begemanns cut off all relations with the Van Goghs, and hedges were grown across the garden gate.

Nothing more unfortunate could have occurred to a man in Vincent's condition. Not only did he feel his own tragedy upon him, but it seemed that he involved in it all who knew him. "Don't come too near me," he had once cried before, "for intercourse with me brings you sorrow and loss."

He was past understanding that a bare four years ago he had been a passionate believer in the religion that had caused this tragedy. "For Heaven's sake," he shouted, "what is the meaning of that standing, and of that religion which the respectable people keep up, oh, they are perfectly *absurd* things, which make of society a kind of lunatic asylum, a perfectly topsy-turvy world—oh, that mysticism!" "Oh, I am no friend of the present Christianity, though its *Founder* was

sublime, the present Christianity I know but too well. That icy coldness bewitched me even in my youth, but I take my revenge since, how? by worshipping the love which they, the theologians, call *sin*, by respecting a whore, etc., and not respecting many would-be respectable, pious ladies."

So, in his rugged fury, he turned back from their "No" to the "Yea." All that autumn he laboured with the peasants, and shared their harvest in the fields. He made a proselyte to his creed. A retired goldsmith in Eindhoven, called Hermans, a man who at the age of sixty had taken up painting, was planning to decorate his dining-room. "He intended to do this with compositions of divers *saints*. I begged him to consider whether the appetite of the worthy people who would have to sit down at that table would not be more stimulated by six illustrations from the peasant life of the Meierij, at the same time symbolising the four seasons, than by the mystical personages above mentioned." The man became an enthusiast.

Vincent at this time took some interest in the politico-clerical situation, which was approaching a crisis, and he professed himself a passionate revolutionary. He saw a magical significance in the fact that the ciphers of that year—'84—were "the same, only just reversed," as those of '48. There was an old civilisation going under, and a new one being born. He identified the outer revolution of the world with the inner one in his mind. Theo, he kept saying, must also renew himself, for revolution was an event that might happen quite silently, "without making any more disturbance than a piece of peat rolling from one place to another. One moment, and it lies per-

fectly still again, and nobody takes the least notice of it."

When winter came, gloom fell on him again. He spent days in the dark huts of the peasants, and there found his only content, painting their portraits and their work at the looms. When the new year came, and "the fields were covered with snow, and the sun rose fiery red out of the mist," he wrote to Theo that no new year had ever begun with so gloomy an aspect, and that the future showed nothing but strife. Out of doors the bare earth, rotting and withered, was an image of the waste land in his hopeless mind. He worked incessantly; but the early darkness kept him from wandering abroad, and he spent hours in silence over the books that came from Theo. There was quietness in the family now. His father had fallen into despair over the estrangement that grew still greater between them, but one day in March they spoke gently together, and he prayed for Vincent's success. A few days later, coming in from a long walk on the heath—for his work often took him far afield—he fell down dead on the doorstep of their home. He was buried in the churchyard out in the cornfields.

They were to stay on in the Pastorie for another year, but life among the women who were left was impossible for him. He moved now altogether into the sexton's house, and spring brought him more freedom. Once more he was with the peasants all of every day, knowing that a painter "must dwell and live in the midst of what he paints." He was at ease with them in all hours, having become, in absolute truth, one of themselves. Like them he was a labourer, and his life was bound up with the actual progressing life of

the earth. He was dependent on the spring sowing or the golden harvest; his mind moved with the seasons; he lived in unison with the hours and the years. In the face of this constancy, he lost sight of death and change. "It is a good thing in winter to be deep in the snow; in the autumn deep in the yellow leaves; in the summer among the ripe corn; in spring amid the grass; it is a good thing to be always with the mowers and the peasant girls; in summer with a big sky overhead; in winter by the fireside and to feel that it has always been and will always be so."

That spring he was making the numberless studies for the heads of "The Potato-Eaters," singing over to himself words that had been spoken of Millet—that his peasants seem painted with the very earth that they are sowing. He made the words more true for himself. He was a master of elements, he played with earth, and out of it shaped the bodies of his creation.

Summer came on with a blazing June, and one day a forest in the centre of the heath caught fire. As soon as he heard the news, Vincent ran off to see it with Driek Dekkers, a peasant-boy who often accompanied him on his nest-collecting expeditions. Vincent stood for hours watching the masses of smoke and flame; and on the other side of the flame stood his brother Cor. They had met on opposite sides of the fire, different characters moved by one impulse; Cor, plain and healthy, a practical engineer, and Vincent, a being of Promethean desires which were to consume him as surely as the forest was being consumed. A time was to come when he must have longed that the impulse which had brought them to one place could have woken in him then a saving vision of the better life

that Cor enjoyed, but he only found that knowledge when it was too late.

While continuing his life with the peasants, he pursued other friendships in Eindhoven, with Hermans, the goldsmith, with a telegraphist, and with a remarkable man called Kerssemakers, who had been destined for the Church, and, like Vincent, rebelled against it. He was now a tanner, and spent all his spare time painting. To all of these Vincent gave some lessons in painting, and their discipleship must have given him a new confidence in himself. Kerssemakers, in some notes which he wrote about their friendship, states that Vincent at one time took piano lessons, as he wanted to acquire some practical knowledge towards elaborating a theory of his about the shades of tone in sound and paint; but the old professor who tried to teach him took fright when he spent all the time comparing the tones of the piano to Prussian blue or emerald green, and refused to teach him any more. If the story is at all true, it is much more probable that it concluded simply in Vincent's usual impatience.

In October he began to hanker after picture galleries again; it was so long since he had seen any pictures but his own. So he and Kerssemakers planned a visit together to the newly opened Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. Vincent went on a day ahead, and they arranged to meet in the waiting-room at the station. When Kerssemakers got there he found Vincent, in his long ulster and fur cap, sitting by the window absorbed in painting. He was surrounded by a crowd of guards, porters, workmen, and the general public, to whom he was paying not the slightest attention. When he saw Kerssemakers he quietly collected his

things together and walked off with him as if nothing unusual had occurred.

During two or three days spent in the museum he made a minute study of technique, especially in the works of Rembrandt, Frans Hals, and Israëls, and felt himself enormously enriched by it. He resolved never again to go so long without seeing pictures, and perceived the town-and-country conflict moving in him once more.

In any case another less reasonable motive was hastening his departure from Nuenen. There was a peasant family living by a mill in the neighbourhood with whom Vincent was on the friendliest terms, where he was often entertained in great simplicity, and they all sat together drinking tea among the chickens who shared the habitation. A girl in the family, whom he had frequently painted, was with child, and the priests of the Roman Church held Vincent to be responsible. In actual fact a member of their own congregation was to blame, and the girl made Vincent her confessor. However, it was more convenient for the priests to keep the responsibility on Vincent, and they forbade all members of their church to pose for him, even offering them money not to do so. He seems to have been indifferent to their malice and their scandalous talk, but as winter was coming on he was helpless without the models. So, after two fruitful years in the village, Vincent made up his mind to leave it, at any rate for a short time. Thinking he would be returning, perhaps, later, he left all his pictures behind at the Pastorie—everything he had painted except for the few he had sent to Theo in Paris. When his mother packed up to leave in March, the pictures were put into a box and left behind.

Together with other unwanted rubbish they were later put in the care of a carpenter at Breda, who, after waiting many years in a vain hope that the family would take them away, sold them for a few crowns to a junk dealer.

Thus lightly honoured was Van Gogh driven from the village he immortalised; where his residence is now recorded by an appropriate memorial—a single blazing sun on a plain stone.

He crossed the border for Antwerp in November 1885, and never returned to his native country. It was his first step towards the south, a movement from darkness to light, and, once he had started, return was impossible.

Chapter 5

Antwerp—arrival in Paris—Cormon's—Emile Bernard—the "Grand" and "Petit" Boulevards—Agostina Segattori—Reid—Tanguy—decision to leave.

NOW, FOR THE moment, indifferent to philosophies, he was caught up again in the life of the city. After the long silence of heaths, he was alive to every impression, and sent Theo some of his finest descriptions, rich with a Homeric love of detail, and vivid with a Keats-like awareness. In his search for models and types he haunted the docks—"more tangled and fantastic than a thorn hedge"—and the cafés along the harbour, the popular dance-halls for sailors, and the cabaret at the Scala. He had been reading Goncourt, and saw everything in terms of "Japonaiserie." There were figures everywhere that delighted him, and girls whose faces were "characteristic and witty." But they were also expensive beyond his means; and as the painting of portraits was his chief ambition just then —though he did a number of town-sketches as well —he joined the Académie des Beaux Arts in January, where the teaching was free, and models were daily at hand. Charles Verlat, at the height of an art career devoted to all large-scale enthusiasms, from pietàs to panoramas, from oriental animalism to facetious poul-

try, had been appointed director a few months before, and supervised the instruction of Vincent van Gogh, for which Sibert was personally responsible. They seem to have credited him with some originality, but told him that he ought to spend at least a year doing nothing but draw from casts—a remark that might have led to fatal consequences. In other ways serious disagreements were only narrowly avoided. He saw at once the falsity of their methods, but determined to finish the course, for the sake of the models. When they attempted to teach him to draw "more correctly" he paid no attention, but went his own way, only pretending to them that "one would like to cure oneself of the bad habit, but unluckily falls back into it all the time." Some of his fellow students began, with his encouragement, to experiment with those bad habits themselves, and were sent for by Sibert, who told them that if they dared to do it again it would be considered that they mocked the teacher. Further hostilities were somehow prevented, and he enjoyed the "friction of ideas." He worked with ceaseless labour, visited the museums, and at night continued life-drawing at an artist's club into the early morning.

Meanwhile he was "literally starving." He had rented a cheap garret in the Rue des Images, which he decorated with Japanese prints, and the rest of his money he spent on materials. Even so, helplessly pitiful, he seems to have befriended an old sick Frenchman, whom he called his comrade. He reckoned that, since May, when he moved into the studio—it was now February—he had only had six or seven hot meals. During the first six weeks in Antwerp there were only three occasions on which he ate anything but bread. His stomach became so weak that when

extra money arrived from Theo he could digest nothing. He became thinner every day, and coughed and was feverish. His teeth decayed and broke. Though he still believed he was stronger than most people—a doctor in Amsterdam once took him for an ironworker—he was forced to consult one again now, who told him that it was an "absolute breakdown." He looked like someone who had been in prison for ten years.

It came to his mind as something incredible that for ten years and longer he had hardly been with Theo for more than a few days. Frightened by his illness—that if it was not properly cared for he might "become crazy, or an idiot"—he resolved on joining Theo at once in Paris. Theo was not ready for him, urged him to wait till May, to return to Brabant in the meantime and help his mother in their move from Nuenen to Leyden. But once Vincent had determined on a course nothing could dissuade him. He wrote urging Theo, and Theo urged back his other plan. The next thing Theo received was a note, scribbled in black chalk at the station and delivered by a porter at the Gallery, to say that Vincent had arrived in Paris and was waiting for him in the Salon Carré at the Louvre.[1]

Sudden as this arrival was, it was an event too long delayed. After the long northern barrenness he found himself plunged into one of the richest movements in the whole history of art. Theo met him, forgave him, and took him to his apartment in the Rue de Laval. He cared for his health, which, after a serious operation on his mouth, rapidly improved; and he tidied up his

[1] Almost nothing of his Antwerp work survives. He probably left it in the garret to pay for his rent.

person so that he became rather smarter than most of his acquaintances of Montmartre. As there was no room at home, Vincent pursued a plan he had formed earlier of working at Cormon's studio. Cormon seems to have been distinguished for his obstinate inability to discern genius or talent in those who possessed it. Vincent had not been there many months before rebellion broke out in the studio. Anquetin, Cormon's best pupil, turned pointillist, and most of the studio began experiments. One day the young and charming Emile Bernard, who was just eighteen years old, and in whom Cormon placed many hopes, was discovered by his master painting an old brownsail—that they used as a background for the model—in alternate streaks of vermilion and vert veronese. On enquiry, Bernard stated that he saw things that way; to which Cormon replied that if he saw things that way he had better go and see them somewhere else. Immediately the studio was in an uproar. The pupils told their master that he was interfering with genius; and Vincent, the story goes, went round later with a pistol to shoot Cormon, "so much had he taken to heart this interference with the free expression of the individual." But he found Cormon fled, and the studio remained closed for several months.[2]

If he had gained nothing else at Cormon's, Vincent had at least found one of his most loyal friends. It is another proof of his unthinking modesty that he was willing to learn from, and associate with, the young

[2] Mr. A. S. Hartrick, who tells this story, and who joined Cormon's when it had reopened, adds that everybody knew that Vincent had gone round with the pistol, but that possibly no one thought he seriously intended to shoot him. Its chief interest is the indication that he was already in possession of a pistol.

Bernard, who was hardly more than half his age. Bernard for his part found in him his first encourager. Vincent used to go and paint with him at the studio which his parents had given him in their garden at Asnières, till one day, while painting Emile's portrait, he fell into a violent quarrel with old M. Bernard, who refused to agree to his advice about the boy's future. He flung the wet portrait under his arm, and stormed home smearing all the passers-by with paint. Thereafter Bernard visited him at Theo's home almost daily till he left for Arles; and when they were separated received from him long letters. After Vincent's death Bernard was one of the most devoted workers for the spreading of his fame.

After the incident at Cormon's, Théo moved into a more spacious flat in the Rue Lepic, and there Vincent had a studio of his own. Theo was now manager of the gallery in the Boulevard Montmartre, and was in endless dispute with Boussod, Goupil's son-in-law and successor, and Valadon his partner. Vincent constantly urged Theo to break away and start a modern gallery of his own, and so far persuaded him that on his next visit to Holland he broached the matter to his uncles, who all discouraged him from doing what they had one and all done themselves as young men. However, he had dared to exhibit in the *entresol* of the gallery the pictures of Monet, Sisley, Renoir, Degas, and others; and it is hardly possible to over-estimate the part played by him in "launching the Impressionists."

Vincent now found himself in an utterly new world. He had known Impressionism only by name, had thought it was merely a passing phase, that painting had reached its climax in Israëls, and neither would

or could go further. Now it was as though he was at the very beginning of time. To signify his acceptance of this new world, he made himself entirely French, and, from now on, wrote and spoke nothing but French. His palette grew lighter and lighter. He examined every one of the new ways of painting, and even joined Seurat on the Grande Jatte—but he soon grew impatient with his slow method of work. He, like Gauguin, had suddenly come among men who were thralled in the fascination of theories they had made, and he saw in detachment new ways of release. Such at least was the effect made by his work, seen from a distance. At the time nobody seems to have felt his importance, and he was content to come into a studio-gathering, put a new canvas down into a corner, and stand silently scowling in front of it, in the hope of drawing attention to it in this unwonted manner.

Many people liked him and were amused by him. He had, according to Mr. Hartrick, an "extraordinary trick of pouring out sentences in a mixture of Dutch, English, and French, then glancing quickly at you over his shoulder, and hissing through his teeth as he finished a series," an attitude in which the Australian painter, Russell, then living in Paris, painted him. He talked and theorised among them all ceaselessly—for he had no occasion now to write letters, and needed an outlet for his mental energy. He renewed among them an enthusiasm for Japanese prints, of which he had a large collection. He had an idea that the crinkled surface of the *crépon* on which they were printed gave a peculiar effect of mystery, which he tried to imitate in his paint. He carried in his pocket pieces of chalk with which he would illustrate his theories on anything

at hand—furniture or white walls. He used to join Toulouse-Lautrec on his night adventures, haunting the "Bals" at the Moulin de la Galette, and the cabarets and the cafés. Then, late at night, he would return home, and sit on Theo's bed continuing his arguments till the early morning. Theo, worn out from his long days at the gallery, had no control over him, and his patience was nearly ended. He had a great love of order, and Vincent had reduced the flat to chaos. His violence was such that Theo's friends began avoiding the house. During the winter of '86, when Vincent was most at home, they nearly came to separation, but with the spring he could go out again on his long river excursions, and a crisis was avoided.

At midday they used to eat at Madame Bataille's restaurant, which he often painted, and in the evening they frequented the Café Tambourin in the Boulevard Clichy, which had been opened two years before by Agostina Segattori, a famous painter's model, "*dont la maturité*," says Auriol, "*ne manquait pas de piquant*." Vincent fell in love with her, and captured some part of her faded affections. She let him exhibit his pictures there, with those of Bernard, Anquetin, Gauguin, and Lautrec, who constituted themselves as the painters of the Petit Boulevard (while the original Impressionists who exhibited in Theo's *entresol* were named the painters of the Grand Boulevard). However, the affair came to its usual conclusion when the café went bankrupt, and he quarrelled with her over the ownership of the pictures.

In fact his daily contact with Theo's business anxieties had revived his own business instincts, and it was probably over an elaborate scheme he had evolved for making a fortune by buying up Monticelli's that

he quarrelled with Alexander Reid. The young Scotch dealer, who was then in Paris, bore a remarkable facial resemblance to Vincent, and several portraits which the latter did of him have been erroneously described as self-portraits.[8] The likeness extended into their temper, which, if it supplied them with a friendship of some months, was also responsible for a violent quarrel which they never made up. Thereafter Vincent was always goading Theo on to get in before Reid with introducing the Impressionists to England. It was many years however, before such services were needed.

Another of Vincent's Paris acquaintances was "Père" Tanguy, a picturesque inhabitant of the Rue Clauzel, where he sold paints, and tried to sell the pictures that people painted with them. He had once been a railway workman, and now he was a friend of all the most important people. Vincent painted his portrait several times; and, when he could not pay his bills, he gave him his pictures.

Thus two hectic years went by, in an almost unrelaxed tension of excitement. During the early winter days of 1888 the state of his health was serious. He feared sometimes that he was on the verge of a stroke. Long before he actually went, he had set his heart on going south—partly for the sun, and partly to seek out and buy Monticelli's, and to continue that painter's work begun in the Midi. When at last he made up his mind and decided on a day, he never told Theo. He had come to adore him, and hardly knew how to say good-bye. He spent the last day tidying the flat with Bernard, and arranging his pictures so that it should

[8] Nos. 270 and 343 in de la Faille's *Catalogue*, described there as self-portraits, are undoubtedly portraits of Reid.

seem as though he were still there. And then he slipped away. The truth is that he recognised that he was sapping Theo's life, and that Theo had other needs. They were coming to interest themselves too much in each other, he said, and life, he wrote to his mother afterwards when Theo was married, does not exist for that.

Besides, he felt the peasant rising up in him again, and he craved to get free from "the sight of so many painters who disgust me as men." In the city's drifting futility he was forgetting his duty to his self. He must go again into solitude; and so far all these reasons he set forth in the middle of February to the south, with no particular destination in his mind.

Chapter 6

Arles—the yellow house—invitation to Gauguin—the Zouaves —Saintes-Maries—the Night Café—Roulin—nature in the south—the sun—the sunflowers.

WHEN HE REACHED Arles on the 20th February there were two feet of snow on the ground, but soon that whiteness was changed to another when the orchards put forth their blossoms, and the earth turned into the time of spring. He felt that he was in Japan. Though deep in his heart there were dark questions forming, he was for the time serenely happy. He decided to remain at Arles for ever. He lived for the first six weeks in a restaurant near the station, while looking about him for a more permanent home. There was a yellow house in the Place Lamartine with a wing of four rooms to let, the rest of the building being taken up by a small hotel. At the beginning of May, Vincent took the empty rooms for fifteen francs a month, intending to furnish one room upstairs as a bedroom, and making another room into his studio. Unfortunately there was no money to buy a bed with, and his attempts to hire one, or to buy one with monthly payments were unavailing. So he continued sleeping at the hotel, for a franc a night, till August, when Uncle

Vincent, after years of suffering, died at last at Prinsenhage. Vincent, once his heir, received nothing; but Theo was left a small legacy, which was at once shared with Vincent, who bought beds and chairs for the house. With such difficulty did he come to possess those simple pieces of property that are known, through his delight in them, to the whole world.

As usual, it was not long before his need of men conflicted with the pleasures of solitude. This time, however, he never thought once of returning to the city, but resolved that others should join him at Arles. There were two rooms in the yellow house waiting to be used, and he set his heart on the idea of Gauguin's joining him. He had often elaborated plans for a sort of mutual-benefit society of artists—and indeed the plans were neither unpractical nor undesirable. He proposed now a school of Impressionists in the south, to continue the work begun by Monticelli, of which Gauguin was to be the head. Emile Bernard and Laval might join them as well, and others would soon follow. He was confirmed in this resolve when Gauguin wrote to him from Brittany that he was penniless, and implying, by various indirect suggestions, that he wanted Vincent to ask Theo to sell some pictures for him. It must be admitted that Vincent's Paris friendships among the painters had been considerably forwarded for him by the fact that his brother was a dealer. Vincent now replied in a burst of enthusiasm that Gauguin must join him, and that Theo would pay all their expenses in return for a picture a month. It was a long time before Gauguin made up his mind. He was settled at Point-Aven, and young Bernard[1] had

[1] It was Vincent who brought them together.

forsaken his parents to join him there, travelling all the way from Paris on foot, since he too had no money. He had gone there to offer Gauguin his discipleship, and to ask to learn from him, but at first Gauguin remained aloof, and only when he was forced to recognise the boy's extraordinary talent did he stoop to him. Now they were living amicably together; but within a year or so Bernard claimed that Gauguin had learnt certain tricks of technique from him which Gauguin claimed to have taught Bernard. The particular question has never quite been settled; but the fact is that Gauguin never said or wrote anything of which the truth has not at some time been seriously disputed.

Vincent waited all the summer and most of the autumn for Gauguin to make up his mind—apart from other objections the latter had no money for the railway fare—and in the meantime he continued his work alone—a season of great fruitfulness.

In contrast with the time in Paris, he was living now a life of considerable austerity. If need be, he wrote to Bernard, who was writing a sonnet-sequence called *At the Brothel,* yes, by all means, go there; one must resign oneself to a little of that, and, for the rest, remain, according as our temperament requires it, soldiers or monks. In order to profit by the whole of the day, he rose at five o'clock in the morning and went to bed at nine. His health soon improved; after some months he felt better than he had done for years; and he only relapsed when his expenses left him no money for food, or when, for example, he once lived for four days on twenty-three cups of coffee, "because I was wild to see my pictures in frames."

The loveliness of his surroundings enchanted him;

he could hardly fix his impressions fast enough, and concentrated all his energies on painting, working with ceaseless fury day after day. He found that work and a gay life were in no way compatible, and if once or twice he looked in at the brothels—which flourished in abundance since there were Zouaves in the town—it was in a search for models, who seemed as unwilling here as elsewhere to sit for him. Vincent's chief delight was always the painting of portraits and the human figure—which, he complained, he could never keep out of his landscapes—and it was the difficulty which he always found in persuading people to sit for him that reduced him to painting himself, for the sake of practice, so many times. Now at the brothels in the wild company of soldiers he made two friends who were willing to sit for him—the Zouave boy, "with the neck of a bull, and the eye of a tiger," and the second-lieutenant, Milliet, who became his daily companion. The latter accompanied him on several expeditions in the country, of which the most memorable was a day at Montmajour where they clambered over the ruins and explored an old garden that was rank with an overgrowth of southern fruits, and from which they stole some excellent figs.

Another time, in June, he went alone for some days to the village of Les Saintes-Maries on the Mediterranean; where he painted the fishing boats, in early morning resting on the shore, and by day dancing on the sea; and at night he walked by the shore and the dunes trying to fathom the shades of the sky and to name the colours of the stars.

At Arles as well, he allowed himself sometimes to gaze upon the night, and then he would sleep during the day. He was fascinated with ideas about night-

painting, and experimented with the ways of expressing starlight, or the gas-flares of the cafés. He spent three whole nights in the famous Café de Nuit, which, he assured Bernard, was not a brothel, but simply a café where the night-wanderers ceased to be night-wanderers by stretching themselves out on the tables. He was almost frightened himself as the terribly sinister picture of humanity that his colours had expressed in the picture that he made there.

It was there, perhaps, or at one of the restaurants where he took his meals, that he first met the postman Roulin. When Vincent writes about him, he almost seems to be inventing a character of fiction. He was a violent Republican—"a man more interesting than most—so natural, so intelligent in excitement, and he argues with such a sweep in the style of Garibaldi"—"tremendously like Socrates, ugly as a satyr, as Michelet called him, until on the last day a god appeared in him that illumined the Parthenon." Above all, he possessed such a rare simplicity of character that he understood and accepted everything in Vincent. He advised him on housekeeping, and helped him buy his bed; and when the tragedy closed upon him, Roulin was seen in all his glory, protecting him with an unflinching loyalty, and guarding all his interests. In addition, he so enjoyed the torment of having his portrait painted that he put at Vincent's disposal his entire family, beginning with a small daughter who had only just been born, next an array of shining sons, and lastly his wife, who was the model for "La Berceuse."

Summer reached its height, and the yellow house stood all day full in the sun. The intense light of the

south brought Vincent "a terrible lucidity at moments, these days when nature is so beautiful, I am not conscious of myself any more and the picture comes to me as in a dream." "Life is after all enchanted," he cried in a time of "extraordinary exaltation." He was ravished with everything he saw. He went even further to the heart of Nature than he had gone during the days in Drenthe and Brabant. Here she gave herself far more freely, there was less struggle with her, her easy fruit-bearing was an Everlasting Yes. He was intoxicated with the richness of the wealth of all the seasons, the cool orchards of spring, the furnace of summer over the white-hot corn, and autumn burning in the vineyards. The pictures which he described in words are dazzlingly vivid. He saw Nature as none had ever seen her before. He combined Tennyson's minute and almost botanical observation, and the sensuous joy of Keats, with the vast imaginative power of Wordsworth. He saw almost visibly the fertility in the trees, the sap in the flowers, the moments of growth, and the riot of life. His words and his paint reproduce these effects with such lucidity that there seems to be no medium between the mind and the object. "The row of bushes in the background are all oleanders, raving mad; the blasted things are flowering so violently they may well get locomotor ataxia. They are loaded with fresh flowers, and heaps of faded flowers as well, and their green is continually renewing itself in fresh, strong jets, apparently inexhaustibly." He felt the link of that life with the life in his own body, and found in that sensation the singleness and the self-completion upon which his power had been directed. The river had found its home. "It is not exactly a question of frenzy—even in the sexual

sense—but from time to time in your life you feel thrilled through and through, as if you were actually taking root in the soil."

How perfect in his eyes was the Japanese artist who was "wise, philosophic, and intelligent," and, "who spends his time, how? In studying the distance between the earth and the moon? No. In studying the policy of Bismarck? No. He studies a single blade of grass.

"But this blade of grass leads him to draw every plant, and then the seasons, the wide aspects of the countryside, then animals, then the human figure. So he passes his life, and life is too short to do the whole.

"Come now," he said, bringing his thoughts to a perfect close, "come now, isn't it almost an actual religion which these simple Japanese teach us, who live in nature as though they themselves were flowers?"

Yet, though he strove to live from that religion, Vincent dared a more heroic life. Day after day he exposed himself to the sun. He was sunburnt, sun-steeped like the labouring peasant, "terrible in the furnace of the full harvest." The sun was the very centre of his world of thought and sight. Up till then men had been content to paint the shadows that it cast, but Vincent faced it from the direct front where there were no shadows. He placed it so often in the centre of his pictures that it is clear he must have been gazing full upon it for hours and days without heed for the danger he was running. He did indeed admit that his eyes sometimes pained him and were seriously inflamed, but he stubbornly refused to yield to any of the "Noes" that were spoken to him by the limitations of his body. Like Prometheus he was transgressing the laws of Nature for the sake of a gift. He made light of the elements, and chose them for his materials. Once

he had painted peasants with the very earth they were sowing; now he painted suns with the very fire that burnt in them, and so rejoiced in the triumph of his power that, for the time at least, he did not care about the consequences. It is better, he had once said, to be the conquered than the conqueror; it is better to be Prometheus than Jove.

His house was painted yellow, symbol of *"la clarté divine";* it was to be a house of light for all men. Such ideas had, needless to say, a more forceful significance for the man from the north than for the Arlesians themselves. In the weeks that he waited for Gauguin, he planned to decorate the whitewashed walls of the interior with six panels of sunflowers. When they were done, he was sure that he had achieved something that expressed the burning character of his finished integrity. "To get up heat enough to melt that gold, those flower-tones, it isn't the first-comer who can do it, it needs the force and concentration of a single individual, whole and entire."

Chapter 7

Gauguin's arrival—failure of the scheme—the self-mutilation —hospital—Theo's engagement and marriage.

IN OCTOBER Theo sold two pictures for Gauguin, and it was no longer possible for the latter to hold out against Vincent's enthusiasm. He reached Arles in the very early morning of 20th October, and waited in the Café de Nuit, chatting to the proprietor—who recognised him from a portrait Vincent had shown him—till it was time to knock at the yellow house.

He came upon the scene of the greatest confusion. Vincent had not the slightest idea of order—it was one of Theo's bitterest complaints when they were together in Paris—and everything about him, from his bursting paint-box to his financial incompetence, was chaotic.

Gauguin set himself, coolly and deliberately, to tidy up the mess, and to bring some system into the life of the yellow house. They left off eating in restaurants, Gauguin provided meals at home—"He knows how to cook *perfectly*," Vincent told Theo; "I think I shall learn it from him, it is very convenient"—and for the further safety of their means, which were supplied entirely by Theo, he instituted a money-box—"so much for hygienic excursions at night, so much for

tobacco, so much for incidental expenses including rent."

The above example of Gauguin's humour implies that they made a regular habit of visiting the brothels, but it is by no means certain that one can draw the same conclusions from Vincent's letters. He does mention a proposal to tour them "pretty often, so as to study them," but during the first weeks, at any rate, of their life together, they worked with such intensity that, by the end of the day, Vincent, for his part, was "dead-beat," and, after a short visit to the Café de la Gare (whose proprietress, Mme Ginoux, posed for "L'Arlésienne,") went to an early bed.

It seems probable that later on Vincent was provoked into a sort of silent jealousy of Gauguin's "luck with the Arlésiennes." He had already felt envious of the gay Zouaves, and once congratulated Bernard on his happy future when he was to put on the uniform of his military service. He himself, he said, was no longer *"chair à femme"* and Gauguin certainly lacked the talent of concealing the knowledge of his superiority. In this respect, at any rate, Gauguin's "system" resulted in confusion worse confounded.

He was not content that the imposition of order should be confined to externals only, but, being incapable of understanding "the utter contradiction between his painting and his opinions," attempted, with inexcusable folly, "to disentangle from this disordered brain a reasoned logic in his critical opinions." The phrase is—shamelessly enough—Gauguin's own. He seems to have taken it upon himself as a sort of mission to disenchant the painter of sunflowers from his love of Meissonier. He failed entirely; indeed, Vincent

grew steadily surer of his early admirations, and believed they would still endure long after the Impressionists were forgotten. So that, after they had been to Montpellier together to see the gallery, their life developed into a ceaseless struggle of opposing forces. "Our arguments are terribly *electric,* we come out of them sometimes with our heads as exhausted as an electric battery after it is discharged."

It would not be necessary to examine Gauguin's claim that, under his tuition, Vincent made "astonishing progress," were it not that Vincent himself made several acknowledgments of the fact. According to Gauguin, before his arrival Vincent "accomplished nothing but the mildest of incomplete and monotonous harmonies"—a statement of extraordinary absurdity. When Vincent called Gauguin "*cher maître,*" he was only evincing another example of his prostrate modesty —and incidentally putting Gauguin into a class with Israëls, Meissonier, and Monticelli. In one point, however, Vincent did follow some bad advice that Gauguin gave him—to paint less from nature, and more from memory and the imagination; as a result of which he produced such things as a yellow poet, and a Christ with an angel, which he shortly after destroyed. It was a charming way to go, the way of abstractions, he said to Bernard, but you quickly found yourself up against a wall. Nevertheless he did conceive by this method the suggestive—almost "symbolist"—canvases of "La Berceuse"; and was delighted to watch his visitor "working at a very original nude woman in the hay with some pigs. It promises to be very fine and of great distinction."

When they had been living together for nearly two

months the relationship became critical.[1] Gauguin's hard intelligence was working Vincent into a frenzy, which he strained his utmost to repress. Once or twice Gauguin woke up in the night to find him coming towards his bed, but when he said sternly to him, "What's the matter, Vincent?" he went back into a heavy sleep.

In November, Gauguin painted a portrait of him painting the sunflowers. (It was probably done by heart, away from the model.) When Vincent saw it, he remarked, "It is certainly I, but it's I gone mad."

One day Gauguin was startled to see him write on the wall

Je suis Saint Esprit
Je suis sain d'esprit.

It appears from his letters to Bernard—there is little indication of it in those to Theo—that he was fascinated at this time by religious symbols; some of which, Bernard says, such as the fish, he also drew on the walls of the house.

One December night, in the café, Vincent suddenly flung a glass of absinthe at Gauguin. Gauguin avoided it, carried Vincent bodily home in his arms, and laid him on the bed, where he at once fell asleep. The next morning he had only the vaguest memory of the night before; but Gauguin, in alarm, had already posted a letter to Theo in Paris saying that he could remain in Arles no longer, and asking for money for the journey back.

[1] It is unfortunate that no other account of the crisis exists but Gauguin's, because several details in it have been deliberately melodramatised, and one does not know in consequence how far it is possible to trust any of it.

Theo had just become engaged to Joanna Bonger, five years younger than he, the sister of their friend Andries Bonger, who was living in Paris. Joanna was staying at the time with her brother. She and Theo became engaged before Christmas, but they decided not to announce it until they had visited her family in Holland during the Christmas holidays.

Events, as they fell together during the next few days, were of a tragic intensity for the protagonists in the story. A short time after the first letter from Gauguin, another followed asking Theo to forget the first as a bad dream. Their quarrel was made up, and they had decided to go on living in the yellow house. On the morning of 23rd December, Vincent wrote to Theo to acknowledge a remittance of money, and added that he would hear Gauguin's decisions about the future with "absolute serenity." He knew that there would be difficulties ahead of them, but these were rather within themselves than outside.

That same evening Vincent was seized with an attack of high fever. Just after dinner, when Gauguin had left the house to go walking alone, Vincent rushed after him, in terrible excitement, across the Place Lamartine, with an open razor in his hand. He was almost upon him when Gauguin turned quickly round, and apparently killed the impulse in him with a look. Vincent went straight back into the house and turned the act upon himself. He cut off a piece of his own ear, and, in doing so, severed an artery. When he had done something to stop the fearful flow of blood that stained all the rooms of the yellow house, he pulled a basque beret down over his head and took the piece of his ear as a gift to a girl in the brothel. "Here is a souvenir of me," he said. When the girl opened the package, she

fainted. A violent scene followed, but Roulin appeared from somewhere in the crowd that was collecting, and managed to get him home. He put Vincent to bed, where he rapidly bled into unconsciousness.[2]

Meanwhile, Gauguin, not daring to return to the house, had taken a room in a hotel, where he spent a sleepless night of terror. He knew nothing of what had occurred when early next morning—Christmas Eve—he found a crowd collected in the Place Lamartine. The police had intervened, and, as soon as they saw him (according to his story), they accused him of murder. They went upstairs and found Vincent asleep but breathing. After a few explanations, Gauguin went away, and left a message that if Vincent woke he was to be told that he had returned to Paris, since he feared the sight of him might be fatal. Then he sent a telegram to Theo telling him to come immediately.

Theo and Joanna were just leaving Paris for Holland when the telegram arrived. Theo started for Arles at once, and Joanna went back to her family alone.

By the time Theo reached Arles, Vincent had been conveyed by the police to the hospital. For several days his life was despaired of. When the attacks were upon him he suffered from the most terrifying hallucinations of sound and hearing, which took the form of some excruciating torment about religion. In intervals

[2] Ingenious romancers have been at great pains to account for Vincent's choice of an ear. A more scientific explanation is also a more probable one. There emerges from the letters of this time a very strong impression that he had either become impotent, as a result of his illness, or discovered that he was sterile, probably while still at Paris. Hence his jealousy, constantly repressed, of Gauguin's flaunting manhood, grew to a crisis. The whole ear-episode suggests some underlying castration complex, substituting a harmless part of the upper body for the desired object of attack. Vincent's concluding gesture in presenting the ear to the girl sufficiently indicates his subconscious intention.

of complete lucidity he was baffled to understand why he should worry about questions that he had quite put away from himself in the Borinage years before; but now they recurred again and again. Emile Bernard, whose *Preface* (1911) is still the most sensitive and understanding study of Vincent, noticed that in the months of his isolation at Arles he was already "re-becoming Dutch." Certainly it is true that he chose to paint features in the landscape—such as the drawbridge—that reminded him of Holland, and paid no attention whatever to such characteristically southern subjects as the Roman ruins. That tendency (which he would hardly have realised or admitted in the times of lucidity) was confirmed when the attacks were upon him; and now, in the hospital at Arles, his mind turned right back to his childhood days, and when Theo laid his head on the pillow beside him, it was "just like Zundert," he said, and he saw with minutest details every flower and plant in the parsonage garden, and even a certain magpie's nest in an acacia tree.

The issue was still uncertain when Theo had to return to Paris. (He was accompanied by Gauguin, who had steadily refused to see Vincent again, although the latter had often asked for him.) Dr. Rey, an extremely competent and sympathetic young man in whose charge Vincent had been placed, sent tidings every day; and the faithful Roulin, who had taken upon himself to look after the yellow house, being himself no penman, dictated letters to his sons. A new friend, Dr. Salles, the Protestant clergyman, was another devoted helper, and also sent messages to Theo.

On the last day of the year, Vincent regained his calm; and, on the first day of 1889, he wrote to Theo himself, in terrible distress at the unnecessary trouble

he had caused everybody, bade nobody worry about him, and rejoiced at the thought of getting back to his pictures, and at the prospect of the coming spring.

As soon as he heard that, Theo joined Jo in Holland; and a few days later Jo wrote herself to Vincent —whom she had never yet seen—that they were engaged. They were married the following April.

On the 3rd of January, Roulin marched off to the doctor, and told him to let Vincent get back to his pictures. The permission was readily given, and on the 7th he left the hospital. His bodily health was completely recovered, and he only suffered from nightmares, night after night. To celebrate his recovery, he and Roulin had a "gay dinner" together in a restaurant, free from all dread of renewed suffering. It exhausted what was left of his money till more came from Theo. Roulin spent all these days with him. On the 21st the wonderful man was transferred to another post at Marseilles. The description of his farewell is one of the most moving passages in Vincent's letters. He never forgot Vincent, and whenever it was possible he came back to visit him.

The rest of Vincent's short life was an unceasing and terrible struggle against his returning illness. He worked with an almost reckless frenzy. The power in him, which had so long striven inarticulately to find its purpose, had achieved too completely its freedom. "There are moments when I am wrung by enthusiasm or madness or prophecy, like a Greek oracle on a tripod."

Early in February he had another short attack. He believed that people wanted to poison him, and when he was taken back into the hospital would not say a word. He began to fear an evil influence in Arles. By

the 20th he was back at the yellow house, but he remained only a few days. A petition was presented to the mayor, with more than eighty signatures, complaining that it was dangerous to leave him at liberty. What they accused him of is not known; but Dr. Salles assured Theo that the statements were inexact, and that the acts of which he was accused would have remained unobserved but for the first act of self-mutilation. It is said that they were terrified at the sight of him with a crown of candles fixed to his hat, which he had invented for his night painting. That was perhaps the sum of their fears.[8] But on 27th February he was taken back, by order and without cause, to the hospital, and placed in an observation cell. He was bitterly distressed, but did not utter a word. He submitted himself completely to his terrible fate, knowing that any protest or violence that he showed would be taken as proof of his "madness." It was three weeks before he even wrote to Theo. At the end of that time he was given some liberty, and when Signac, who was visiting the south, came to see him, they went together into the town. The police had taken possession of the yellow house, but Signac forced an entry, and Vincent gave him in gratitude a picture of two smoked herrings, which—since that was their nickname in the town—had caused the police particular annoyance. They spent a happy day discussing literature, painting, socialism, and Vincent felt the better for it.

Meanwhile, Dr. Salles was devoting himself to plans for Vincent's future, but, when he found a flat for him,

[8] It is just possible that the whole thing was got up by the landlord of the yellow house, who, in Vincent's absence, had let the house to a tobacconist. Vincent refused to be turned out; and his forcible removal would have been a convenience to the landlord.

Vincent declared he felt incapable of ordering his own life ever again, and himself proposed retiring to an asylum. Theo protested, with many fears, but when Dr. Salles heard of, and himself went to inspect the Asylum of St. Rémy on the road from Tarascon at the foot of the Alpines, which would allow him considerable freedom but supervise his illness, he agreed to the arrangement. On the 8th of May, Dr. Salles accompanied him thither, and helped him settle. They parted with considerable emotion on both sides, and Vincent was left without a friend in that desolate place. The result of the triumph of the individual is his useless isolation.

Chapter 8

St. Rémy—illness and misery—last discoveries—birth of Theo's son—return to Paris—Jo—moves to Auvers—Dr. Gachet—illness of the child—last visit to Paris—final despair—death and burial—the positive work.

WHEN VINCENT entered the asylum, he explained his case to Dr. Peyron with perfect detachment; and mentioned among other things that a sister of his mother's was epileptic, and that there were several other cases in the family. This is not, in itself, absolute proof that the fact is true; but a number of ambiguous statements in the letters do suggest that both Vincent and Theo were the victims of an inherited malady. If that is indeed the case, it adds another terrible element to the tragedy of lives. They were creatures pursued by furies.[1]

In their letters to each other, they agreed that his illness had undoubtedly been caused to a very large extent by his reckless neglect of every physical requirement. For twelve years and more he had violated all

[1] It would account for the peculiar violence of the family's opposition to his love for K., who was a cousin on his mother's side; and it is just after the close of that episode that the references in the letters begin—which suggest that they may have been told at that time. But this is conjectural.

the laws of nature in the fury of his spiritual enthusiasms; and his body must truly have possessed much of that peasant strength which he claimed for it to have survived so long. It is also undeniable that at times he indulged overmuch in tobacco and alcoholic stimulants. Not that he was in any sense whatever a slave to either of these things, nor that the extent to which he used them would have caused any injury to a normally cared for body; but in view of his lack of other forms of nourishment—for even when he was not starving of compulsion he would submit himself to deliberate austerities—the quantity was probably disproportionate. Indeed there is some truth in what he wrote from St. Rémy, looking back to the time of the sunflowers—"to attain the high yellow note I attained last summer, I really had to be pretty well strung up."

At St. Rémy he lived a life of regularity and plainness. He was given an empty room to use as his studio, and in the garden of the asylum and the hills of the neighbourhood found subjects enough to keep him working all of every day. With his own life he was fairly content, but he was distressed beyond measure at the emptiness, the utter dreariness of the lives of his companions. He was surrounded by a howling menagerie. Not a day went by without one of them throwing himself in frenzy to the ground. He was moved at the pity that they showed one another, and the help that others gave them when the crises were upon them. He felt a sort of relief at knowing that other people suffered in the same way as he. But in the hours of their calm, nothing, absolutely nothing, was done for them—"not a book, nothing to distract them" —nothing but to wait for the next attack to fall. Their

existence was dragging itself out in that hopeless futility from which he had sworn, on that day when he first read Renan, utterly to lift himself.

Painting at least would save him from that—but it could do nothing more. His love for it was dying almost as completely and almost as bitterly as his love for religion had died. Religion, love, art, every object upon which Vincent directed his power, broke beneath the strain. Everything failed him. He was overwhelmed with despair when he thought that for years and years Theo had paid away half his livelihood to him so that he might do this thing, and that he had never sold one single picture. Painting, he said, was like a bad mistress, who spends and spends. What was to be done? he asked; "my pictures are valueless, it is true they cost me extraordinary expense, perhaps even in blood and brain at times." Coolly considered, it seemed to him "foolish, and a thing against all reason, to be doing this painting which costs us so much and brings in nothing, not even the net cost."

One picture of Vincent's to-day is "worth" more than twice as much as he spent in the whole of his life.

And in his life he asked nothing more than to feel at least that he had paid his own debts—and he could not even feel that. So he begged Theo again and again to accept the only thing he possessed to give—a frank acknowledgment that his brother was half creator of the finished work. And "I beg you," he said, "to accept the various pictures I am sending you with my thanks for all the kindness you have shown me, for without you I should be very unfortunate."

"But my dear lad," he cried, "my debt is so great that when I have paid it . . . the pains of producing pictures will have taken my whole life from me and it

will seem to me then that I have not lived. . . . That there is no sale for them now, it gives me agony because you suffer for it." To which, "Once and for all there's something I must tell you," Theo replied. "I consider the whole money business simply doesn't exist, or rather it exists just as a malady. . . . You talk of money that you owe me, and want to give me back. I simply don't acknowledge that. . . . You don't know how much pain you give me when you say you will feel you have not lived. . . ."

But Vincent still replied, "I will give you back the money, or give up the ghost."

Then slowly there grew in him, like a completing vision, the knowledge of what his life had lacked. Action! Not in imagination, but real physical activity. He came to know that such was the way of life by which men achieved most simply their integrity, that it was a happier life than "this blasted life of art." Like Coleridge, who, in despair at the stupidity of a university, enlisted in the Light Dragoons, Vincent now played with the idea of joining the Foreign Legion. Theo so far understood what he meant as to see that a walking-tour would do him most good, but nobody had the time to give to him. Vincent's plan was in no sense a light-headed or eccentric one; it had been growing in him logically for a long time; it was the final sober discovery of an intensely rich experience. He had bidden the young æsthetic Bernard—who was sulking at the prospect of his compulsory service, and trying to find excuses to evade it—by no means to look on it as a misfortune, but rather as a great and profitable trial from which he would come out a better artist. Now he discovered it to be the solution of his own

problems, and the belief that the hard life of a soldier would cure his illness was the least of his reasons. In his last canvases we see the work of a man who was struggling to express more than his medium could say. While remaining a painter, his impulses were urging him towards an activity that does not belong to the painter's sphere at all. His frustrated faith in action was changed into the rhythmic fury of his skies and trees. Years before, he had said that nature has fixed laws against which it is fatal to struggle, but that was in the days of his pleasure with Sien. Now he was the victim of the same truth, and it was breaking him. "There is something else in life than pictures," he said, "and this something else one neglects, and nature seems then to revenge itself, and fate is set on thwarting us." The last of his hopes had said the Everlasting No.

But he was too tired now to endure another change, and he went on painting, painting, "in a dumb fury of work." In one of the infinitely tender letters he wrote to his old mother at this time—another symptom of a return to the child-state—he said that he still keeps looking more or less like a peasant of Zundert, "only peasants are of more use in the world. Only if one has time to rest one gets a feeling, a desire for books, etc. In my estimation I consider myself certainly below the peasants." He is sickened now with culture, as part of the futile life, and assigns its origin to hours of rest from labour. But then he tries to comfort himself with an analogy. "Well, I am ploughing on my canvases, as they on their fields." And he did not lose his believing mind, but kept his faith that Nature never did betray the heart that loved her; which took on a new significance for him when he heard, in July, that Jo was with child.

All this time Theo's own health was breaking down, and Jo herself was not strong. They were acutely anxious about their coming responsibility, but Vincent gave them plentiful reasons that all would be well. He had been reading about Tolstoi and the continuance of humanity, and saw that Jo was making it true. "Ah, now certainly you are yourself deep in nature, since you say that Jo already feels her child quicken—that is much more interesting even than landscape, and I am very glad things should so have changed for you." He waited for the issue in the intensest excitement, while the last year of his life arrived. On 29th January he had another severe atack following a visit to Arles. On the night of 30th January, in the very hours before her child was born, Jo wrote him a letter of marvellous bravery.

> I have been meaning to write to you [she said] every day since Christmas—there is even a letter half-finished in my desk—and now if I do not hurry and write you this little note you will already have the news that your godson has arrived. Before that moment I come once more to say good-day. It is just midnight—the doctor has lain down to sleep a little since he is spending the night here—Theo, Mother and Wil are sitting by me, round the table —waiting for the thing that's going to happen—it's a strange feeling—one wonders every moment, will the baby be here to-morrow morning? I can't write much, but all the same I like to chat with you a moment.—This morning Theo brought me the article in the *Mercure*[2] and after Wil and I had read

[2] By Albert Aurier, about Vincent. See p. 124.

it we talked a lot more about you. I want so much to see your next letter; Theo's waiting for it with impatience—shall I read it? But so far everything's gone well—I will keep my courage. This evening—as all the last few days—I have been asking myself often if I have really managed to do anything to make Theo happy in his marriage. He has made me happy. He has been so good to me, so good—if it doesn't end well—if I have to leave him—tell him —for there is no one in the world he loves so much —that I will never let him regret that we married each other, for he has made me so happy. That sounds much too sentimental, a message like that—but I cannot tell it him at the moment—half my companions have gone to sleep a little, he too, for he was so tired. Oh, if only I could give him now a pretty, healthy little boy, wouldn't that make him happy? I must stop now because I have attacks of pain every moment, so that I can't think or write regularly. When you get this letter everything will be over.

Your loving

Jo.

Two days later, Vincent, still dazed with the terror of his own illness, wrote to rejoice upon the birth of a son, "the thing I have for long so much desired."

It had always been settled that a son should bear his name, but "I should like him," said Vincent, "to have a soul less unquiet than mine which is foundering." He had written to the child's mother, "Above all do not like painting, nor those who are directly or indirectly concerned in it, for it is only to doubtful whether it has any beauty or use." He had written to dissuade his

sister Willemien, who was showing tendencies that way, from taking up art. "I always urge her to occupy herself rather with household matters than with artistic things." Now, when the son was born, he wrote to Theo: "From the beginning you must beware of bringing up your family *too* much in an artistic setting." And barely a week before he shot himself: "I think it is certainly better to bring up children than to give all your nervous strength to making pictures, but what then? I am—at least I feel—too old to go back on my steps, or to desire anything different. That desire has left me, though the mental suffering remains."

A strange conclusion. The wheel had come full circle, the vision was complete. Vincent, the rebel, the enthusiast, he who had sworn to attain nobility, to realise great things for humanity, this Vincent had decided in utter weariness that the ordinary, common life of domesticities was the best one after all. "It may be," he wrote to Jo, abandoning the struggle on behalf of all he had held dear, "it may be we are neither savages nor peasants, and it is perhaps *even a duty* to like civilisation"; but he cannot even now yield entirely, and adds, to mock his failure, two words after "civilisation"—("so-called").

And, in the meantime, their younger brother Cor, strong and plain and happy, was going away to South Africa, away from this dying world, setting out to a life of healthy action, which, so remote from Vincent's, yet so desired by him, makes a strangely fitting contrast in these last days.

One long year he endured at St. Rémy. He was working, he said, like a miner who is always in danger. In the July after his arrival he was allowed to visit Arles in the hope of seeing his old friends; this was

followed by a very serious attack, as a result of which he was confined indoors for about two months. At Christmas, exactly a year after his first seizure, he was taken ill for a short time, and in moments of desperate rage tried to kill himself by eating his paints. There was another short attack at the end of January, just when his nephew Vincent was born; and three weeks later a severe one which lasted about a month, as a result of which he once more missed the spring and the blossoms that he so longed to paint again. Both the last two followed visits to Arles. The latter occurred actually while he was there; he was brought back to St. Rémy by carriage, and nobody knew where he had spent the night.

In the intervals he enjoyed complete lucidity, and suffered from nothing worse than intense depression. He went out painting in the neighbouring "Alpines," and made pictures in all seasons of the olive orchards, and of cypresses. During the weeks when he was not allowed out of doors he made his famous versions of pictures by Millet, Delacroix, and Rembrandt, from prints which Theo sent him; of which he aptly said that they were not copyings, but rather translations into another tongue, or the personal interpretations of somebody playing another man's music.

He also painted the scene of the harvest which he saw when looking down through the bars of his cell. "I see in this mower—a vague figure fighting like the devil in the midst of the heat to get to the end of his task—I see the image of death, in the sense that humanity might be the corn he is reaping. . . . But there's nothing sad in this death, it goes its way in broad daylight, with a sun flooding everything with a light of pure gold."

He had learnt the art he set himself—to suffer without complaint. But by the spring he felt that all would be lost if he did not leave the fatal St. Rémy and the fatal south. After some months of enquiry, Theo found him an ideal place to move to. Through Pissarro he made the acquaintance of Dr. Gachet, a specialist who lived at Auvers-sur-Oise, an hour north of Paris. It was a beautiful village of thatched roofs in a landscape of river and hills, which had been something of an artists' colony since Daubigny settled there. Vincent could go and live in the village, with complete independence, and yet be under his care. The matter was all arranged, and, on the night of the 17th of May, Vincent travelled north from Tarascon.

He insisted on making the journey alone, in spite of Theo's fear for his falling ill on the way. But "once in the train," he said piteously, "I run no more risk, I am not one of those who are dangerous. . . . I have tried to be patient, till now I have done no one any harm; is it fair to have me accompanied like a dangerous beast? Thank you, I protest. If an attack comes on they know in every station what to do, and then I would let them do what they like. But I dare to believe that my balance will not fail me. I am so distressed to leave like this, that my distress will be stronger than my madness, so I shall have, I do think, the necessary balance."

Theo and Jo, at Paris, waited in desperate anxiety for his arrival. In the morning Theo went off to the station to meet him, and Jo remained behind—they were living in a new flat in the Cité Pigalle—with her baby son. She had never yet seen Vincent; she was not to know him for more than five or six days in all. It would have been so easy and so natural for one in her

position to have resented and opposed the influence that possessed her husband's mind, and exhausted their resources. But when both Vincent and Theo were dead she devoted the whole of her wonderful life to the spreading of his fame, obtaining recognition for him, first as a great artist, and later as a great man. She herself collected and edited his letters to Theo for publication in Holland, an enormous task which was completed by 1914; and having done that she embarked on their translation into English—for she was a very great scholar of the English language—and she had almost completed the work when she died in 1925.

Now she was waiting, in May 1890, for the man she had never seen. At last they appeared below the window, Vincent and Theo, waving and smiling from an open cab. He looks perfectly well, she thought; he looked much stronger than Theo. Before any words had been spoken he was taken to see the sleeping baby. It was a climax to his experience. Then, "Do not cover him too much with lace, little sister," he said.

> Christ [he once wrote to Bernard] alone among philosophers, magicians, etc., affirmed as a main certainty the eternal life, the infinity of time, the nothingness of death, the necessity and reasonableness of serenity and devotion. He lived serenely, *an artist greater than all artists, disdaining marble and clay and colour, working in living flesh.*

"It's a serious business, that," he added, "and all the more so because it's the truth."

Thus, looking at the child, he felt in his heart that something more perfect had been made than anything he would ever do.

He remained with them a few days, but soon found that Paris life was over-exciting him, and after a chaotic re-examination of his pictures, which occupied every corner of the house, and visits from many of his old acquaintances, he left, on the 21st, for Dr. Gachet in Auvers.

Dr. Gachet was a great eccentric. Apart from the distinction which he had earned in his profession for the advancement of his medical ideas, he was well known as an art connoisseur, and possessed pictures by most of the great Impressionists, most of whom he knew personally. Before his house, which was built on a hill, there extended a large terraced garden, and here and in a back yard he entertained a friendly company of turkeys, ducks, and hens, a troup of cats, a maturing peacock, and a goat called Henrietta.

Vincent thought he was probably as mad as himself, if not more so; from which we may gather that he was possessed of a rare and understanding wisdom. He accepted Vincent entirely. He called him a "giant," a "colossus" in his painting, and admired him equally as a philosopher. Writing afterwards to Theo on Vincent's passion for art, he called it not so much a "love" as a "faith," to which he had died a martyr; and in such understanding the Gachet household has celebrated his memory to the present day. He was then sixty-two. His wife had died many years before, and he had two children, a boy of sixteen, and a girl of nineteen. At least once a week he entertained Vincent to meals, which were far too big for either of them, in a sentimental attempt to recreate the grandeur and happiness of former days. In appearance he is said to have resembled Vincent. He was delighted with the portrait that he made of him—in which Vincent put "the heart-

broken expression of our times"—and, after he had initiated Vincent into the art of etching, which he practised, they made together the picture of him holding a pipe.

Vincent lived at the Café Ravoux in the Place de la Mairie, which was the cheapest place he could find. Sometimes he had the company of Hirschig, a Dutch painter also living at Auvers. For about a month his life went fairly easily. His mind was in a state of quiet, tragic resignation. He painted portraits and landscapes, and—going to nature with the closeness of a child—exquisite studies of single blades of corn.

One Sunday in the middle of June, Theo and Jo brought the baby for a whole happy day at Auvers. On the last day of the month, Theo wrote Vincent a letter that reflects some of Vincent's great power of writing and feeling. He told him that the child was very ill, and that he and Jo were in the greatest anxiety. He was in fact distraught from all the difficulties and miseries in his own life. Boussod and Valadon at the gallery seem to have surpassed Mr. Tersteeg in their brutality. He did not know how to calculate for the future, nor what steps to take. Yet he lovingly bade Vincent not to distress himself for them, saying that the knowledge that he was well and working so admirably was his greatest comfort. For, said the younger brother to the elder whose life he had saved, you have found your way.

Vincent was overwhelmed at the news about the child. He wrote directly, saying that if he thought he could help them he would come at once to Paris, but he feared he would be more powerless than they. Nevertheless he followed his letter almost at once, and spent one or two emotional days with them. Theo and

Jo were worn out with ill health and anxiety, and they all exhausted themselves over plans for the future. In addition, there was a stream of visitors to see Vincent, including Toulouse-Lautrec, who made grotesque jokes about an undertaker they had passed on the stairs.

There also came Albert Aurier, author of a famous article about Vincent which had appeared the previous January. It spoke of him as an artist in almost extravagant terms. Vincent was touched, but hardly believed the man meant what he said, and replied that he should rather have applied his remarks to Gauguin or to Monticelli.

A little after that, Anna Bock, sister of his friend the Belgian poet, bought one of his pictures in the Vingtistes' Exhibition in Brussels for four hundred francs. Vincent was happy, but upset that one of his friends should have spent so much money. He therefore proposed that Bock should take another picture, in exchange for one of his—a regular practice of Vincent's. These were the first two acknowledgments that the world made to him, but he was now indifferent to success. Besides, he said, he hadn't the temperament for it. He only wanted to pay his debts.

He went back to Auvers very soon. In a few days the child recovered, and Theo and Jo took him to Holland. After a short stay Theo returned. Vincent was greatly relieved, but the whole affair had made a deep impression on him. If only they could recover their healths—they wrote to each other. In fact Vincent's last days were come. "My life too is threatened at the very root, and my steps are wavering." One day at Dr. Gachet's a triviality suddenly provoked him into fury.

He put his hand to his pocket to pull out a revolver, but a look from the Doctor quelled him—as Gauguin's had done. Another day he said to Ravoux, his host, that he could hold out no longer, he felt his life slipping away from him. He went out painting "vast stretches of corn under troubled skies, and I did not have to go out of the way to express sadness and the extreme of loneliness." He painted, finally, that wild raving field beneath black menacing birds.

On the evening of 27th July he climbed up behind the old château among the trees. There was a last unfinished letter in his pocket, which he had just begun to Theo. "Well, my own work, I am risking my life for it," he wrote, "and my reason has half-foundered in it—that's all right—but . . . you can still choose your side, I think, acting with humanity, but what's the use?"

Then he shot himself. It is not possible to fathom all the progressions of thought and experience which led him to this act. Perhaps it was his last helpless gesture of despair to the world. It may be that by some twist in his mental reckoning he found a vicarious satisfaction in performing an act on himself which was originally directed, in violent repression, on the world outside himself—just as the attack on Gauguin was changed into self-mutilation. Since he could not slay the world, he died for the world. Other reasons, too, urged themselves upon him. He had promised Theo to pay the debt, or to give up the ghost. He was in constant terror for the return of an attack. But more than these incidental causes was the deep-rooted logic of his sworn austerity—*mourir à soi-même*.

Death, says Freud, is "the final goal of all organic

striving"; and Vincent writes, "If we take the train to get to Tarascon or Rouen, we take death to reach a star."

He had done it bunglingly. He buttoned his coat about him, and stumbled home. Ravoux saw him cross the café and go up to his room. Dinner-time passed and he never appeared. When they discovered what had happened Gachet came hurrying with his son, Paul. Vincent refused to tell them Theo's address. He lay quite calmly smoking all night. In the morning Gachet sent Hirschig to fetch Theo from the gallery. When he came they talked together for a long time in Dutch, and he asked continually after the child. Theo was overwhelmed with grief. He remained with him all day and all night. In the early morning of the 29th, after a long silence, Vincent turned to Theo, and, "I wish I could die now," he said. Then he fell into unconsciousness and, shortly after, died.

One might have thought that such a death had wiped out all the follies in the world. But the Curé of Auvers refused the parish hearse for the funeral of a suicide, and they had to borrow one from a more enlightened neighbour.

Emile Bernard, Laval, and Tanguy brought from Paris his living pictures, and decked them round the room where the coffin lay. Theo and Jo's brother bore him to the grave. Gachet, who carried a great bunch of sunflowers, spoke some words, to which Theo replied. And then Theo collapsed. It was, said Bernard, as if the brother called his brother from beyond the grave; and six months later, quite broken with grief, he died in answer to the call.

"It is better to be the conquered than the con-

queror." Prometheus accomplished the glory of fire, and Jove, the Everlasting No, was mocked in his triumph. We are still far from seeing the pattern in nature. All that concerns us now is that a man once passed through the world and left marvellous pictures behind him. "Mysteries remain, sorrow or melancholy remain, but that everlasting negative is balanced by the positive work which thus is achieved after all." And nothing in the tragedy need touch us but this—the pictures themselves; wherein is expressed "the thought of a brow by the radiance of a light tone . . . hope by some star, the eagerness of a soul by a sunset radiance"; which make visible life's innermost activity, moving in the flowers of the earth or the limbs of men. The labour of the north, and the fiery southern fruitfulness; irises, roses, sunflowers; the sower and the reaper; the painter, the postman, the poet, and the soldier; the strength of man in the furnace of autumn, the cool orchards, the rich vines; the boats that move across the waves and are lulled with "the old sense of cradling"; the woman who dreams over the cradle in the quietness of Nature herself; the boy that stoops to gather in his arms the wealth of the harvest, clasping against his body the glory which earth gives back to man.

Van Gogh

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